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DISPERSAL POINT
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fiction

JACOBSON'S LADDER
AND LASTLY THE FIREWORKS
UNCLE ARTHUR AND OTHER STORIES

non-fiction

THE GREEN GRASS GREW ALL ROUND
WHO ONLY ENGLAND KNOW
WORLD STILL THERE
THE AIR BATTLE OF MALTA
ATLANTIC BRIDGE



It *Breathed* Down My Neck

a selection of stories by

JOHN PUDNEY

London

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD

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Dissertation

IT BREATHED down my neck. It started with a phrase, a catchword, a remembered situation. I caught a glimpse. I overheard a remark. That is how the story came to be written.

There is something akin to writing poetry in the creation of a short story. There is a similar lack of premeditation, a similar urgency, and a similar demand upon training and technique. Like poems, stories fail when they slavishly follow a worn pattern of stylisation or when they have no form at all.

Let us not be too solemn, however, about the exciting and exacting medium of the short story. Let us not narrow it down to a mere exhibition of sensibility or dexterity. Its infinite range and its small compass fuse essentially as a work of entertainment. That is the touchstone of the short story. If it be too long or too short, too pedantic or too diffuse, too obvious or too obscure, it is doomed. However funny, or ironic, or tragic may be the theme, it will never 'come off' without that concentration from the reader which is only forthcoming from the entertained.

That is the hazard of the short story. It demands a true harmony between the skill and the imagination of the writer: it commands the concentration of an entertained reader. It needs to be written almost at one sitting. It requires all the technique you have ever learned, no particular rules except a beginning and an end, no particular length except just the right length—and a hefty nudge from that creature now abandoned by modern jargon, your Muse. Then sometimes it will 'come off.' It will strike people. It will cause mirth or thoughtfulness or sadness. All this, provided you sell it.

Here the writer's integrity sometimes clashes with com-

mercial necessity. Stories are good for quick money, for pot-boiling, for window-dressing. They bring satisfaction, cash and recognition if they are sold at all. A literary trap is the danger of successful repetition. A man becomes known, for example, and well paid for stories of a certain *genre*. He is tempted—nay, if he is lucky, bribed—to write too many of them, too many variations of a theme, until the breathing down the neck becomes regular and there is no more surprise. If he listens to his literary integrity he will lay down his pen in the very midst of his most pleasant facility.

I often think that in England one must judge the native talent for the short story medium partly upon the 'one that got away.' The market seems circumscribed, small, and conventionally grooved. For years the popular markets (shrunk almost to nothing by paper shortage) have favoured stories that tell a story and no nonsense. The literary markets (also shrunk and not good payers anyway) have favoured sad atmospheric stuff, stories by implication, by subjective fancy. There are many stories and many writers which simply do not fit the grooves. Some of them sell their work in America: most of them make a good living some other way. The art of the story does not thrive.

This selection of my own work over a dozen years includes some pieces which nobody will buy and some which have surprised me with nice fat sums from repeated printings here and abroad. Several are from a volume which perished in the 1940 Fire of London, several emerge for the first time from the bottom drawer of my desk. I have rejected nearly everything I wrote about the war because I distrust and am weary of war-reportage, particularly my own.

For the fact that these selected tales form such an oddly-assorted company I can add no other apology than that of my title, that each severally breathed down my neck.

Chipstead, Sevenoaks, 1946.

The Boy Who Saw Through

SUMMER CAME to an end without sadness.

The skies broadened, washed by seas of ultramarine and amber.

Ernie seemed to see it all for the first time, and rejoiced. The summer had enclosed him with long unsmiling days. He stood on the lawn to see it all for the first time.

'I shouldn't stand on the grass, Ernie.'

'It's not wet, Mother.'

'Try and do as Mother asks you, Ernie.'

Mother knows best. Mother must be right. In a minute Mother would wish him to remember it was Sunday.

Bringing down his yellow eyes from the foreshores of the autumnal sky, Ernie regarded Mother at the bay window. 'Don't stare at Mother like that, Ernie. Try to help her by doing what she asks you. . . .'

O Mother, Mother, what are you made of, what unyielding dreams, what cautious flux, that time and company, season and mood, break against you like cloud oceans, dissolving?

'Remember, Ernie, that it is Sunday.'

Mrs. Tarch closed the window against her son's yellow eyes. Soon there would be a smell of roast in the house: George Tarch, her husband, would finish winding the clocks and say whether he meant to go to church. The prayer books were ready upon the hall table. By looking out through the shrubberies she would observe the hurrying vicar and know that there was time enough. The Tarches were never late. When George Tarch wound the clocks, he set them not to

strike at the same time; but the dining-room clock was always right.

To what end does he wind clocks, does he fidget with time, as though he is afraid of losing it? What does he hold so fast? What does he fear to lose when his hand closes upon his bunch of keys?

'Your mother says you'll be late for church unless you put your things on now.'

'I am just going to put them on. . . .

'There's a good lad.'

Nothing happens to people like the Tarches. They have made themselves secure against events.

'I thought, perhaps, you'd decide to come to church, George, as it's harvest festival.'

'No, my dear, I think I'll look after the house.'

At such times this excellently furnished figure of a man, George Tarch, consciously possessed the house, as less fortunate men might possess a watch or a favourite pipe. He jingled his keys, sauntered from room to room, counted the insurance policies in his bureau, and told the maid to do some small service. For many years these actions had symbolised his sense of his responsibility, of the care with which he concerned himself with his property, of the gratifying caution with which his income had been spent, leaving a margin for the accidents which never happened.

George Tarch feared accidents as he feared death: and death he feared as the body and soul of the unknown. It lurked in every cough, in every noise in the night, in every headache, in every knock at the front door (there was a side entrance for tradesmen), in ideas, too, and people who talked about them, in every laugh unless it was laughed at something silly, in every pleasure except the easily-paid-for pleasure of an upright man. The unknown yawned at his window sills; lingered in his listening lintels, lying

just beyond where he could see from the corners of his eyes.

I would agree with you that George Tarch was a very dull man, and I would not burden you even to this extent with his affairs were it not that amid the smell of Sunday joint and the comfort of his wound clocks, an accident was imminent, a triviality, a trick of chance of which some might be sceptical but which emboldens me to print his complaint to his wife as he saw the two of them off to church.

'You must tell Ernie not to stare at people. It almost puts me out: and what strangers must think I cannot imagine.'

'You hear what your father says, Ernie?'

'I don't mean to stare. I find people interesting.'

'At your age?' Mr. Tarch laughed without heartiness. 'You'll soon find out that people are not interesting.'

Living close, but observing other people from behind the half-drawn curtains, was what he meant and what Mrs. Tarch understood.

Mrs. Tarch explained it on the way to church. She wondered they did not teach that sort of thing at school. As Ernie listened the green twilight of Sunday in Steeple closed over his head. He walked in a neutral light. He did not know if his eyes were open or closed. Houses of plush brick peered at him from their shrubberies; villas, behind hard veils of ornamental railings, contemplatively grinned.

They walked through the nice part of Steeple. High above them, the pale coasts of the autumnal morning were washed by iridescent tides.

'I think we'd better hurry, Ernie. All this talking has put us a little behind.' They were in sight of the church, sepia beneath its elms.

'It's all right, Mother, Mr. Gimble is only just getting into his church clothes.'

'Nonsense, Ernie. How can you tell what he's doing?'

'But, Mother, he's combing his hair in front of a mirror. . . .'

'Now listen, I won't have you saying things like that to your mother . . . and on Sunday, too.'

'But, Mother. . . .'

'Now hurry along.'

Mrs. Tarch was not an unkind parent. She was zealous and careful. A pointless untruth was wicked: even if a convenient falsehood was sometimes no sin.

'But, Mother. . . .'

Mrs. Tarch accelerated, intent on being in time. Ernie sighed. It was no good trying to explain that he had looked at the church beneath its elms, and, there within its sepia-green gloom, he had caught sight of Mr. Gimble in shirt sleeves combing his hair. It was probably curiosity which enabled the sight from his yellow eyes to penetrate the brickwork. It was no good trying to explain that curiosity. It flashed within his head like a sword picked up by a meek curious boy in the darkness of a forest.

They hurried, to be in time to watch the principal worshippers arrive. Mrs. Gimble came, the Lush family, Colonel and Mrs. Pleag, and the two Miss Mannisters. Mrs. Tarch whispered that she'd like to know the reason why the doctor's wife was missing—no maids again, she supposed.

The melancholy summons of the bells ceased: the clock struck. A hood of virtuous silence descended upon them. 'The vicar's late,' hissed Mrs. Tarch. 'I wonder why. . . .'

Ernie shook himself and glanced across at the closed door of the vestry.

'The vicar's lost the lower half of his teeth.' He said in a clear voice. 'Half the choir's down on the floor looking for them.'

Colonel and Mrs. Pleag looked round with urbane horror. The Lush family began to giggle. Mrs. Gimble

flushed, and fought back a desire to spring at the boy.

'Remember where you are, Ernest,' said Mrs. Tarch, without moving her lips.

He remembered. He wondered how he had come to say it so loudly. It was the surprise, no doubt, at seeing Mr. Gimble and the choir bobbing about on the floor behind the closed vestry door. He shivered. He seemed to hear the Pleag's mutter, 'What do you expect, with parents like that.' He seemed to feel the taut enmity in the slant of Mrs. Gimble's shoulders. He was terrified as usual by the giggles of the Lushes.

Why not, though, open your eyes and see? Why should you, discreetly lidded, squint down your nose, cowering from the fierce watery brightness of autumn in the world? Why never, open-eyed, see and perceive, discern and understand?

'Ernest, you have disgraced your mother,' hissed Mrs. Tarch, as the vestry door opened at last and the choir filed in.

Mr. Gimble usually was sonorous and unhurried. His gestures could be histrionic, his pauses could be statuesque: but now he fidgeted, held his head on one side as if he had water in his right ear, and, catching sight of Ernie, on his way to read the lesson, he shied in a strange manner and seemed to wish to conceal himself behind the lectern.

Ernie filled in time examining the harvest festival decorations. That was a marrow from their own garden with a bad spot near its stalk. There was a bunch of asters which Father had said they could ill afford to spare but which Mother had said were what they owed to themselves.

Furtively, for he had been told that God watched everything in church even if you picked your nose, he began to think of school. If he did not do better at school, Father had said that he would have to leave and go to work. He liked the noisy genial hours of school: but he had found it difficult

to make friends. It had taken him years to learn the language of people of his own age. Now there were Sammy, the Bosh, Murdoch and Lilley.

'Thank God for Sammy, the Bosh, Murdoch and Lilley,' he murmured devoutly in time with Mr. Gimble's recitation of familiar prayers. 'Amen,' sang Mrs. Tarch, a little flat, and all the congregation in unison. Ernie smiled as the last hymn number was being given out, staring at the froth of white hair at the back of Colonel Pleag's head.

Colonel Pleag lost his place, dropped his hymn book, turned round and glared. Ernie smiled on, his yellow eyes gay and adamant. 'There's something about that youngster,' said the Colonel afterwards, 'which would earn him a touch of the belt if I was his father.'

After the service was the usual social gathering. The Tarches enjoyed these brief encounters in which one might chat to half the nice people in Steeple. So when Mrs. Tarch was seen to hurry out almost on the heels of the choir and forego that pleasure, people talked about Ernie's lapse without restraint.

'Such a nice quiet little chap, I've always found,' said the good Miss Mannister.

'But you can never tell, can you?' said the bad Miss Mannister. 'You never know which way young people are going nowadays.'

'I thought it was simply killing, my dear,' screeched Mrs. Lush. 'What ever made the boy say it? I could have died.'

'Well, it will be a lesson to Mrs. Tarch who's always so cautious with the boy.'

'For him to begin inventing things like that about people. Yes, it's probably the mother. You can't make bricks without straw.'

'And did you see the way she hurried him off afterwards?'

'My dear! To say it out loud like that! Ah! Here's Mrs.

Gimble. We were just talking about young Ernest Tarch, Mrs. Gimble. Such a funny thing to say out loud in church. You must have had quite a shock till you realized he was making it up.'

'It is shocking, Mrs. Lush, and inexcusable: but between ourselves, my husband has just been complaining of a slight accident with his dentures having made him late.'

'The poor, dear vicar! Now, isn't that killing. And they really were on their hands and knees looking for them, I suppose?'

'Naturally,' snapped Mrs. Gimble. 'But two blacks don't make a white, Mrs. Lush.'

The door slammed: and the smell of roast was intense, languorous, comforting. Respects had been paid to God, the payment had been public. On other Sundays it was a time of respectable anticipation culminating in the maid announcing the meal, as the clocks, in isolated discord, struck one.

'Your mother says you disgraced us, Ernie. That is bad enough: but to have disgraced us at church! Where is your honour? Where are your manners? And, above all, where is your duty to us?'

George Tarch stood upon the Sunday paper he had dropped when his wife had abruptly said why they were back five minutes earlier than usual. He wore the tie-pin he had inherited from his aunt. He was a large man, ornamentally moustached, abounding in unused muscle.

'What would you do if you suddenly saw through a wall?' said Ernie.

George Tarch raised his eyebrows and blinked like a man with a terror of fire who smells smoke.

'I don't see through walls, nor do you, nor does anybody else, Ernest. If you think you can change the subject by talking nonsense you are mistaken. Your father is not fooling.

Your mother is so distraught she has had to go to the bathroom. And I want an explanation.'

'I happened to see through the wall,' Ernie fidgeted with his long spindly legs, 'into the vestry where Mr. Gimble and the choir were searching for the false teeth. And as mother was worried about the service being late, I told her what was happening.'

'But even if it was happening, which I refuse to believe. . . .'

'It was. I saw it.'

'Don't interrupt your father. I was saying that it did not happen, nor did you see it; but that even if it was happening and you did see it, not through a wall of course. . . .'

'I did see it through a wall.'

Mr. Tarch, about to reach his climax of reproach, fairly hollered, 'Silence! Ernie! Seen or unseen, you have disgraced your mother by talking aloud in church about false teeth.'

Ernie could not deny it. Sooner or later it had to happen, this step into the unknown, this penetration of the humid silences of Steeple. He wished he could explain it to his father who was so outraged, confronted amid the hallowed comforts of Sunday with an event of this significance.

'Were it not for lunch, I would punish you now, Ernie. If your school, which is costing me good money, does not teach you manners, it seems to me you had better start earning your living. There is no time for fooling in the School of Life.'

Tarch himself had not fooled for fifty years, nor had he experience of what he called the School of Life. For living on a number of small bequests is not part of that curriculum. In such disciplinary moments, however, he liked to indicate a possession of all the qualities of the successful realist.

'What should I work at, Father?' Now that he stood on

the threshold on this chill autumn Sunday, Ernie became eager. His resolution had grown. He had called upon the spirits of Sammy, the Bosh, Murdoch and Lilley, those boisterous friendly spirits: they who talked incessantly of motor-bikes, of cinemas, of cafés in the 'cheap' part of Steeple with gorgeous waitresses, of all the gifts of the gods to aspiring man.

'Mr. Quail would be willing to give you a start in his office. I discussed it with him not long ago after your bad report from school. Mr. Quail would take you out of consideration to your mother and me. I have a good mind to let you go now.'

Tarch glanced at his watch as if to emphasize the present, but really because of his hunger. The majority of the clocks had struck one: he had endured the invitation of the smell long enough. He was a realist.

'In the meantime your mother is not down, and lunch is late,' he stated in a momentous voice; and the yellow eyes of his son suddenly taxed him. He felt the initiative slip from him. Who was this strange half-grown boy, who so differed from himself, flouting the solidity of things, undermining the smooth respectability of Sunday, making lunch itself late?

'If Mr. Quail will take me, I am ready to start at once, Father.'

'We will talk about it after lunch. *Where is lunch?*' Tarch made for the door, his voice rising. He never opened that door.

'Mother is in the kitchen giving Annie a talking to. Annie has let the joint fall on the floor, and I think she's refusing to pick it up again,' said Ernie.

Tarch stood still: 'You are either a liar, Ernie, or something very serious has happened to you. No, don't answer back. I want you to realize that your mother and I are

respectable people, with a decent standard of living, and our own steady way of looking at things. Even though you are our only child, we can't stand this fooling: we are serious people.'

'But Father, I saw. . . '

'Silence, Ernest!' Tarch's hand tugged at the tassel of a cushion, an incongruous support, but a reassurance that it was Sunday in the best room. 'Now I want you to take back every word you said. You know it can't be true. You know you did it to draw attention to yourself. You know your sight is quite normal and you are being stupid and disrespectful when you talk about seeing through walls. Take it back, Ernest, and we will then have lunch.'

'George, the joint has been on the floor. I've given her notice, of course.' It was Mrs. Tarch leaning against the violently open door.

'Just as I said,' Ernie smiled at them.

'This is serious, Doris, more serious than I had been led to suppose.'

'Nobody led you to suppose,' snapped Mrs. Tarch, 'that Annie would be impertinent and drop the joint, and that I should give her notice.'

She looked at her husband with terrible intensity. The four walls which were Sunday became fallible. George Tarch had the sensation of somebody walking across his grave. He looked away from his wife Doris, from his son Ernie.

'For God's sake let's have something to eat,' he quavered. 'We can't face this on empty stomachs.'

'George, please remember where you are. I see no necessity to face anything. Annie may be under notice, but she is dishing up the joint as if nothing has happened.'

As if nothing had happened! As if by the simple indul-

gence of roast beef a man could return to blessed uneventfulness! Tarch sighed. 'When you know all, Doris,' he said, 'you will realize that. . . .'

'What?'

'All is not gold that glitters,' said he with desperate irresolution.

The meal was eaten in silence. People like the Tarches cannot discuss trivialities in the presence of beef; much less can they toy with the ultimate.

For it was the ultimate which stood solid as the grandfather clock within the dining-room. It was the ultimate which peeped at George Tarch from beyond the corner of his eye.

Ernie had a second helping without noticing it. Mrs. Tarch looked up, saw it and was afraid.

'I am going to talk things over with your mother,' said Tarch at last, as the meal finished.

Ernie nodded, and a gust of exultation went through him. Countless Sundays had passed with the promise of this. He looked back into the shadows. He saw himself acquiescent, not unhappy but always expectant.

'Do your carpentry if you like, Ernie; but don't go out on your bicycle,' said Mother, as she always said.

He left them in the passage. He was alone. He went down the back steps. The afternoon blew up with a boisterous shout of wind. How clean and savage was the autumn which he was seeing for the first time. How the line of the shrubbery gave to it; and, beyond, how good the world smelt, the boy's world of things; of roads, of wide steel, of bridges, of limitless water flashing, of fabulous cities. And the heirs to it all were himself, Sammy, the Bosh, Murdoch and Lilley.

Ernie walked to the end of the crowded little garden and sat down on the iron seat.

So now he was breaking out at last, to a job of his own, to partake of the full motions of the sun, to enjoy the ease

of those wide shores of the sky above Steeple to which the Tarches never raised their eyes. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets and lowered his eyes to the confines of the garden. The drawing-room faced that way: and, there through the drawing-room wall, he saw Father and Mother discussing his future.

His father kept pointing to his head and twiddling his forefinger as he did in extreme cases to emphasize that something was 'barmy.' His mother began to cry, and pointed to the family photographs arranged on the piano.

Ernie patiently watched them come to a decision, after which his mother sat upon his father's knee with strange wooden indecorum. Then his father came out, hatted against the wind, and said: 'Ernest, your mother and I have been discussing what to do about you. She agrees with me that schooling is costing money and doing you no good. We feel that the sooner you are launched in life the sooner your difficulty in taking life seriously will be overcome. And now, more important still, Ernest, are your sudden lapses into seeing things. Your mother and I regard these as ridiculous. You must realize that you cannot see through walls. It cannot happen, and even if it does happen you must realize that it hasn't. You might bring untold worries upon your mother and myself by behaving in this way.'

'Poor Mother, I'm sorry she has been crying. . . .' Ernie began.

George Tarch stopped speaking. Ernie's dutiful words lifted the hair upon his head as a gust of wind might lift a dead summer leaf.

'Ernest,' he said. 'Once and for all, facts are facts. What you don't see you don't believe.'

'I saw you. Mother began to cry. . . .'

George Tarch was then afraid. 'Ernie,' he said, 'how long has it been happening?'

'It really happened for the first time in church this morning.'

'Your mother and I,' sighed Tarch, 'will never believe in it. You must try and get out of the habit.'

'But it's only just beginning. I shall get better rather than worse,' said Ernie in a voice which was louder and more confident than the Sunday bells.

The Tarches often said that that Monday took ten years off their lives. It was a day of events and decisions; a day merciless in its pressure upon them. In the morning Tarch wrote a letter to Ernie's headmaster, saying that he felt the time had come for his son to enter the School of Life.

Ernie mended a puncture in the outhouse, delighted with himself for being able to look through two walls into the sitting-room, there to see his father bite the end of his pen.

'Our whole standing is at stake, Doris,' Tarch had said after breakfast. 'I, myself, have never believed in the extra expense of all this education, and now you see what it has led to. They do nothing but teach children to think nowadays, and you can see for yourself what effect it has had on our Ernest.'

'Easy to be wise after the event, George,' Mrs. Tarch had replied. 'But I for one shall never feel safe with Ernest going about saying. . . .

'Don't repeat it. It only encourages us to believe what we know isn't true.'

'True or untrue, George, I think we ought to go to that Dr. Roople. After all, when Mrs. Haverstock's little girl had that nervous twitch, Roople did wonders.'

'More expense! and how can any doctor deal with a small boy seeing, well, never mind what.'

'But you know as well as I do, George, that it must be the hallucinations.'

'I have never heard of hallucinations coming true,' Tarch had said reluctantly, 'but still, we must stop them. After all, he might be seeing us now. Yes, take him to Dr. Roople by all means, and I shall go and see Bernard Quail and fix up the boy's Start in Life.'

So Ernie mended his puncture and longed for his father to finish writing the letter in order that he might the sooner visit Mr. Quail, and Mrs. Tarch came out dressed as for church and said: 'Ernie dear, I should like you to come along with me and see Dr. Roople. Before you start your new work, I want to feel that you have been medically examined.'

Dr. Roople closed his eyes and seemed to draw a narrow blind down over his thin face, a habit of his which alarmed everybody, but which caused many to hold him in high esteem because of his inscrutability.

'Please come to the point, Mrs. Tarch: or let me have the boy brought in for an examination.'

Mrs. Tarch sat in the bright, hard room and had the creeps. 'I am afraid you will never believe it, Dr. Roople, but he says he can see through walls.'

'Aha, he can see through walls, can he?' said Dr. Roople without surprise. 'That's the sort of thing I like to hear about. Send him in at once, Mrs. Tarch, and come back for him in a quarter of an hour or so.'

'But hadn't I better stay here and explain.'

'Of course not. There's nothing to explain.'

'But, Doctor, it is a terrible thing to happen. His father and I are distracted. Why, yesterday he said something in church, out loud you understand, which will be all round Steeple by to-day. I am sure it is hallucinations and they can be cured. And don't you see, Doctor, if it goes on, where will it end?'

'Where indeed! Mrs. Tarch.' Up went the blind of Dr.

Roople's face. He stood up brusquely. He rubbed his hands. He hustled her out of the room. 'Leave him to me, Mrs. Tarch,' he cried.

Ernie found himself familiar with the white room as if he had seen it many times in his sleep. He looked at the doctor inquisitively. He recollected the keen eyes, and the jut of bushy eyebrows, the nose, the chin. That much he had seen in his sleep; but not the rather elegant clothes, the gay careless way he carried a large silk handkerchief to match his tie.

'Hullo, Doctor,' he said.

'Hullo, boy, I expect you know me?'

'I seem to have seen you somewhere.'

'That's good then,' said Dr. Roople flourishing his fine silk handkerchief. 'I'm glad you know the room. It's a splendid room for light, isn't it, for discovering anything, for *seeing through* anything.' He smiled, the ugly face suddenly communicative and friendly.

Here was a man, surely, with no fear of the unknown, with nothing about his frank ugliness to hide.

'So you see through walls, Ernest Tarch?'

'Yes, Doctor. Ever since church time yesterday.'

'How do you like it, seeing through walls?'

'It's not bad at all. It's interesting, you know. I see so much *more*.'

'Of course. You see the truth,' said the doctor laughing.

'I suppose it does happen to people sometimes. I mean, there's nothing wrong with it, is there, Doctor? It seems to be upsetting my parents terribly.'

'It would.' Dr. Roople, so often saturnine and bored, laughed again. 'Your mother brought you to me to be cured.'

'Is it as serious as that, Doctor?' Ernie, unembarrassed for once, stood with his long legs wide apart, and felt no

desire to fidget. He had stepped out of the twilight of his irresolute teens. The shadowless room debarred the half truths of Steeple.

'It is not serious in the least, Ernest Tarch; but I shall cure you. I shall satisfy them, never fear. You are quite certain you see through walls?'

'Oh yes. I do it whenever I want to.'

'Then look behind you and see what your mother is doing in the waiting room.'

'She is folding up several of the waiting room periodicals. She is now hiding them in her shopping bag beneath the greens.'

'Splendid, Ernest.'

His hands behind his back, the doctor began to pace the room. 'You are probably not familiar with the truth, Ernest. No, don't try and answer. Your curiosity has now led you to seek the truth with which you are not, from day to day, familiar. You have begun to see things through walls. That is admirable. I congratulate you. People will envy you. I have no intention of curing you. You are incurable.'

'But you just said . . .' began Ernie.

'Truth is incompatible with your present surroundings. You and I will effect a simple balm. You will promise me, here and now, never to mention seeing through a wall to your father and mother, never to mention it, indeed to anyone in Steeple.'

'But that would be a lie.'

'A lie in defence of truth. You would find, even if you mentioned it, that people would call you a liar. People nowadays are educated out of believing in things which don't happen. It is deplorable: because a wise man will tell you that things don't happen as often as they happen. *You don't eat, yourself, more often than you eat.*'

'I don't see through walls more often than I see through

walls, come to that,' said Ernie sensible and smiling, triumphant at least over the serried absolutes of the Tarches.

'You are talking common sense,' declared Dr. Roople. 'And now, realize that our balm must be your promise to me not to fall from that common sense and talk about your sight. On the contrary, conceal it. You will then prosper, your parents will be satisfied and I will be your friend. Promise me, Ernest Tarch, never to declare how you see through walls.'

Dr. Roople, satanic and benign, seized him by the shoulders. 'Promise me, and the truth will never desert you. Or ask me to cure you and I will. I could pluck this incurable truth from you by the roots. I could let you look at that wall and see nothing but a white wall separating you from your mother. . . .'

The fingers gripped his shoulder emboldening, ennobling. 'I will promise to do as you say, Dr. Roople. I will pretend I have seen nothing. So long as nothing interferes with my seeing.'

'You will continue to see! Bravo, my boy!' cried the Dr. Roople, whom many people found sinister, but whom Ernie discovered as the flux of the sun itself in the timeless shadows of a forest. 'And now a test! Your mother will come in to know whether you have been cured. We understand one another. You are cured.'

They shook hands—the first time Ernie had shaken hands with a grown-up, a stranger. He understood the stranger.

Mrs. Tarch came in, her face drawn by the sharp light. She scrutinized the doctor. She placed her hand upon her son's shoulder. She would now get her money's worth. 'I expect you would like Ernie to wait outside while we talk, Doctor,' she said, for she feared the frankness of the look that had not left their faces.

'Nothing to worry about, I assure you, Mrs. Tarch.

Nothing which cannot be discussed here and now. An adjustment of a most important faculty, that is all. I find it prevalent in juvenile minds. I have adjusted it.'

'Are you sure, Dr. Roople? Isn't it rather quick?'

Half a guinea is half a guinea, she thought. What will George think if I say it was done while I was out of the room?

'Quick, my dear lady?' The doctor's silk handkerchief flicked doubt before him. 'It is science. You don't study science, which is knowledge. I do. A matter of seeing through walls is scientific.'

Mrs. Tarch nodded, her lips tightening. Was this value for money?

'Let us show you, Mrs. Tarch,' continued the doctor. 'Ernest, tell us now. You have been looking at the wall of the waiting-room. What did you see your mother doing?'

'Really, Dr. Roople, that's hardly. . . .'

'We must have a demonstration!' Dr. Roople looked like the devil himself to Mrs. Tarch as she sweated and shivered all in that one moment.

'A demonstration?' she croaked, standing solitary in the pointing light.

'A demonstration!' Dr. Roople chafed his sharp hands. 'Ernie, my boy, what did you see?'

'I saw nothing,' said Ernie, his yellow eyes closing with the finality of drawn blinds. 'I looked at that wall and saw nothing.'

'Oh!' cried Mrs. Tarch. 'Oh! Ernie, you saw nothing. You saw the wall, you good boy! Oh!' Her relief snatched at him to embrace him.

'And what were you doing, Mrs. Tarch?' said that satanic doctor with a wink at Ernie which was not included in his fee.

'I was too agitated . . . really I can't remember what I

was doing. But if the boy's better, Doctor, I shall never know how to thank you. Er, I hope it won't be too much, will it?'

'The price of truth, Mrs. Tarch, is experience. Your son's case has interested me so much that I shall forgo my fee.

'Of course, Dr. Roople. You hear that, Ernie? The doctor finds you interesting.' She rose, set on her balance again by the something-for-nothing so suddenly proffered.

'Ernie returns the interest, I am flattered to say, Mrs. Tarch. Take one of those picture papers home with you, Ernest. It will take your mind off this tiresome consultation.'

Standing at the door of his room Dr. Roople watched them go out, the boy flaunting his periodical, the mother concealing hers.

'Ernie, go outside while I tell your father.'

'But what is there to tell?'

'Your mother knows best, Ernest.' It was Tarch's misfortune that events should strike him while he was awaiting lunch. Being Monday, there would be cold joint. 'And I told Annie to do potatoes in their jackets,' he announced, as if it had been a measure taken to preserve their very lives.

'I don't see any need for that, George.'

'Well, Doris, I just fancied them. I don't remember having them since the day Aunt died.'

'Oh, George! How can you talk like this, when we both have so much at stake. Boiled potatoes on Mondays have been good enough for us ever since we were married. . . .'

The talk of solid things, of small certainties, comforted them, postponing the inevitable question, 'And what, Doris, did the doctor say?'

Mrs. Tarch sat down to enjoy her success. 'I'm glad I insisted on going to this Doctor Roople. He seemed to understand it from the beginning; and he said he'd cured it already. He tried it out on the spot. He asked Ernest if he had seen into the waiting-room where I was. Ernest had

seen nothing; and it's a very thin wall. I happened to notice.'

'I suppose it was waste of money after all then. The chemist might have put up something in a bottle which would have done just as well.'

Mrs. Tarch smiled her bargain basement smile. 'It hasn't cost us a thing, George. It shows what a clever man that Dr. Roople is. He was so interested in Ernie's case that I managed to get him to forgo his fee. What do you think of that?'

Tarch smiled too. 'Something for nothing, eh Doris?' he said, enjoying the sound of the words.

Ernie watched their self-congratulatory embrace and turned again to his puncture mending. Once the novelty wore off, there was nothing in seeing through walls just for the sake of seeing. Dr. Roople had steadied him, blending at once the enchantment of the autumn and the exciting curiosity which possessed him.

'So I hear this Dr. Roople has put an end to all that nonsense,' jovially commented his father at lunch.

'Oh, yes; he's cured the nonsense.' Ernie unostentatiously looked through the kitchen wall to see what sort of pudding Annie was making ready.

Sago again. He had a second helping of meat.

Spilled Ink

LONG AFTER the bitterness of winter was spent, he lay abed, watching the patterns of the wallpaper. He had walked in a furnace, clamped in by those patterns. As the shadows of his fever had darkened with itching chaff, with flying crows, with stampeding herds of black heifers, these room walls had contained his nightmare.

Now the corner of High Wood, seen over the comfortable cottage sill, was topped with colour. From the back of the house, blind against the north wind, he could hear the ewes and lambs, the delicate uneasy sounds from Tye Wold which had broken into his nightmare like the risen sun. Painfully his mind accustomed to spring. He was a countryman. He had never observed seasonal changes; they had happened to him. Through High Wood and across the whole breadth of the land to Goodfellows, each spring season moved, and he, humble and skilful, had served the spring. He earned his money in that serving. He loved neither spring nor hard winter. His blood had sweated in the torrid harvest noon: his blood, hedging along the top of Tye Wold as the first snow beat out of the black wind, had frozen.

Now he lay in the low room: and downstairs, she grumbled to the neighbours. 'He said he was a'going to die, the owd fool. Just fancy he talking like that night and day—and steaming and sweating. . . .'

To save himself from dying, from being taken in the stampede of haunted hooves, and the black clatter of hell's

farmyard, he had thought of the work to be done with the turn of the year.

'A nice thing, I told him, the owd fool, to be left a widow at my time of life. A nice thing, I said, for him to snuff out like he was an owd man that had to die.'

Now he, still trapped among the patterns of the wallpaper, was getting better too slowly; the spring, the corner of High Wood, the thin sound of the lambing, overtaking him. His body, cunning and wiry, lay weakly between the sheets. He felt the muscles of his forearms. He recognized his returning strength and smiled for the first and last time.

She came up the stairs. He said, 'Who was you a'grouching to, this time?'

The stairs took it out of her. She stood at the top, directly beside the brass bedstead and she was giddy and sick like an old woman.

'Mrs. Heaven, that was,' she said at last. 'She was asking after you, which was good of her, though I don't expect you to take notice of a body's kindness.'

Her voice was like the first snow again, blowing out of the black wind.

'And I heard what you was saying, owd woman,' he said. 'Ought to be ashamed to . . .'

'Ashamed!' she wheezed. 'I know who it is ought to be ashamed. Lying there, week in, week out, living on club money . . .'

She had brought up the club paper to be signed, and she went across to fetch the ink from the chest of drawers. Comeliness had gone from her as goodness from a tree. Downstairs, the other woman, Mrs. Heaven, talked, endlessly reporting his struggle with death, no doubt seeing him still as the young lithe man who had taken her first on the pile of old straw in the empty vicarage, whose ruin cracked beneath the choking ivy.

To his wife, he said: 'You'd no business to talk to that Mrs. Heaven. I heard you with that owd cow.'

Mrs. Heaven talked, enjoying the warmth of the spring day, sniffing the air across Tye Wold. Mrs. Heaven talked about his weakness, his weak struggle in the nightmare of that hard winter.

But up in the close little room his wife said: 'You want to learn to leave people alone. If a body can't talk . . . without you listening there, idle, instead of minding your own business, instead of . . . here's the ink. Fill out your club paper.'

'Give me the ruler, so I can write straight.'

'Want waiting on, don't you?'

She stood up, the strength gone out of her in the winter. 'I'm tired of waiting on you, that's flat. I'm tired. . . .' She fetched the old round ruler he always leaned on when he signed his name in his difficult schoolboy hand. Its balanced heaviness! He remembered being allowed to hold it and to use it for drawing lines at school.

Mrs. Heaven, who now talked with easy laughter in her voice, and asked questions, and 'passed the time of day,' as she called it, with barbed curiosity, had been a plump ardent girl who married Tom, his mate, because she had to. She would never have talked of a man's weakness then.

The balance of the heavy ruler toppled from his hand. It fell against the ink bottle and sloshed out the ink across the sheet.

'Look what you've done,' screeched the woman by his bed, loud enough to be heard down the row through the cottage walls. 'Look what you've been and done!' Her voice suddenly dried as it rose. Her strength dried, too, as she began to cry. Instead of bringing a wet rag to the sheet, she knelt down and dabbed at it with her thin hand. All the

time she cried through her tears that this was too much, this blue stain over the sheet.

'Stop that will you? That's only ink, that'll wash out. Stop that. . . .' He spoke as he would on the farm, checking the horses: but her voice rose overpowering him. It was the bitterness of the winter again, blowing out of the black wind. 'Stop that or I'll clout you.'

She lifted her head, fighting back at him with her rising voice and the sere look fixed on him by her eyes. The itching chaff, the flying crows and the stampeding black heifers loomed in those eyes. He brought the ruler snapping down between them, killing her, killing the nightmare, killing, once and for all, the winter in the room.

'What have I done?' he said, in the silence. 'What have I done now?' The spring day poured in across the wallpaper patterns. Up the stairs came the voice of Mrs. Heaven passing the door with her little bit of shopping. 'They say he still hasn't the strength of a fly, which is funny, ain't it when you think. . . .'

He heaved his legs up to the edge of the bed. His feet touched the ground, hot and angry with pins and needles. He was a living man again: he would walk out to the door and tell Mrs. Heaven about the spilled ink, the long nagging blackness of night he had withstood; and the sun would warm his strength.

So he thought, as he spun clutching at the brass bedstead; and then, falling, with all his slight weight into the steep void of the cottage stairs.

Mrs. Heaven, in a blue spotted apron, laid them out, and said how funny it was that they had both gone away to skin and bone. Then she made herself a cup of tea and talked to everybody from the doorstep, the ruler concealed in her ample front, and a white sheet bellying out on the clothes line at the side of the house, clean of ink.

The spring smiled on her, memories of the past and of death made her sad, so she thought of the summer, and was happy, her tongue gravely wagging of the terrible accident in the little cottage with drawn blinds.

Ethel and Her Engine

ETHEL HATED young Jake, the bus driver. Not so much because he was her brother-in-law, Muriel's husband, as because of the way he spoke of the Dunworthy Railway. Since the days he was courting Muriel he had allowed himself to become more scornful, even going so far as to state openly that the stationmaster, porter, and station cat were as mangy and obsolete as the rolling-stock and the three engines. The fact that young Jake's bus was speedier, cheaper, and more efficient than the railway was none of his doing really; it was part of a system, part of a new industrial phase. The Dunworthy railway had its roots in the past, and its hopes in the past. The reason for its existence was part of a racket no longer remembered, a company formed to link the two rival trunk railways then separated by the twelve-mile spread of the parishes of Dunworthy, Worthy-Bo, and Wockton, and by means of this link to attract commerce and renown (and, of course, pigs for the market) to Dunworthy. The enterprise was opened by the Duke: and for a few days it was the wonder of the country. Its first coaches had been painted blue and yellow—the Duke's racing colours—as a compliment to His Grace's interest in the scheme: but more important than that was the moral which the Press of the day was quick to express. 'Self-help,' it said, 'coupled with integrity, is a virtue which can never be overstressed. We congratulate the people of Dunworthy for their industry and pioneering spirit.'

For years the high purpose of the Dunworthy railway held.

Men and pigs used it for cheapness, for speed, and for the moral integrity it engendered. Another generation passed, with years of industrial expansion, wars, and political confusion, before that purpose tarnished. The amalgamation of the two trunk railways at either end, ignoring the existence of the Dunworthy railway, was the beginning of a sharp decline. The incredible followed—a rival service! Driven by young Jake, straight from his job in a bicycle shop, the first Dunworthy bus covered the ground in half the time at half the cost and, though it made no attempt to cater for the pigs for Dunworthy market, carried all before it.

‘My Jake says that old railway’ll go right out of business,’ said Muriel. ‘It’s only a question of weeks now, he says.’

‘Your Jake ought to be ashamed of himself, that’s all,’ said Ethel. ‘What about Uncle Ben? What about the engines and carriages?’

‘Yes, what about they old things! It’s time our Uncle Ben retired, if you ask me, and old Ezra. They neither on ’em got aught to do at that station but garden, and they’re well-nigh past that. As for the engines, there’s only the two as Uncle Ben calls the new ’uns that’s worked these last two months. And he says himself they won’t last unless they’s scraped out. T’other old thing has been in Hocking’s yard this last six months.’

‘That’s *His Grace*. And I’ve heard Mr. Hocking say you’d never get an engine made like that to-day. Time the boilers is scraped, he says, *His Grace* will lick the lot of ’em, though he is the oldest.’

‘Bah, silly, that was when Mr. Hocking had had a few. Just because he’s got a siding put into his yard years ago he thinks he’s an engineer. Why, my Jake says he can’t even mend a puncture.’

‘He’s a blacksmith, Muriel; why should he?’

'Oh, don't talk daft, Ethel. You're growing up now, and you ought to know better, you really ought.'

'And be like your Jake, I suppose, as thinks he knows everything?'

'You see if he ain't right then. My Jake says there won't be no daft old railway, with Uncle Ben and old Ezra and Mr. Hocking and *His Grace* making fools of themselves, not to mention making the family look silly.'

Muriel was expecting: and because it would be the first grandchild, everyone was out to please Muriel. Even Uncle Ben agreed with her Jake.

'That old thing done wonderful service in her time,' he said, 'but I reckon she's about bust. It's times, of course, that's changed. It's them buses and motors and a by-pass road and all. That's not Dunworthy as has moved, mind, but the whole bleedin' world. . . .'

'But they can't stop your trains, Uncle Ben, not unless you says they can,' said Ethel.

'Aye, and that they can then. Company'll put in a liquidator fellow as'll sell us up, stock, sleepers, and all; and that'll be that. That'll be that.' He repeated it over and over to himself as he stooped to tie up the young tomato plants against the wall of the six-by-four Gothic temple marked *Gentlemen*.

'And what about the engines and carriages? What about *His Grace*?'

'I reckon some colliery will buy 'em up, same as they bought the last lot of rolling-stock. Dunno about *His Grace*; poor old chap's in a bad way. Terrible state he's in.'

Uncle Ben wore his stationmaster's cap only ten times after he said those words, for the liquidator announced that the Dunworthy railway would close at the end of the month. Nobody was surprised to hear the news. There had been

much more excitement, in fact, about the new by-pass road being opened by the Lord Lieutenant.

The last train service of all was on a Tuesday—market day in Dunworthy. The national newspapers sent down reporters and photographers, and Ethel, in her last term at school, took the day off on the pretext of a bilious attack.

She wished to be a waitress at a railway station buffet; and before reaching years of understanding she had always hoped that Uncle Ben would open such a place at Dunworthy station. How calm and graceful were the two young women in the buffet at Wockton Junction. Muriel had been at school with one of them, and she said they did nothing but knit till a train came in. They were cut off, these goddesses, from the ordinary routine of shops and offices in streets. Their customers changed continually, but the food never. Ethel rolled up her sleeves and handed herself an imaginary cup of tea in front of the mirror. She would look superb, her dark hair combed back, the plumpness of her small arms emerging from glossy black sateen.

Mum got Muriel to write to the big railway company about it, but the reply was disappointing, just as young Jake prophesied.

‘You’ll have to take the first job as comes along, Ethel. Mum’s quite enough on her hands without you: and now I’ve got the youngster, of course, we shan’t be able to help. My Jake knows the new fellow with the garage on the by-pass, and he says he’s going to put up a fine big tea-room. Now that’s the place for you, Ethel.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Besides, you’ll have motorists on the by-pass; ever so much nicer.’

Only three more weeks she had at school then, when she took the day off, saying she was bilious. At the closing of the Dunworthy railway they photographed the last train as

it sauntered along, picking up equipment, odd rolling-stock, and the office ledgers. They photographed the two engines, *Her Grace* and *The Queen*, with Uncle Ben in his cap, and the two engine drivers. Ethel herself appeared in the scene they photographed on the platform of Dunworthy Station, a scene which made Uncle Ben grunt and drop a tear or two in the Gothic twilight of the *Gentlemen*. Several of the older Dunworthy people were openly in tears. Only Ezra and Mr. Hocking, the blacksmith, were drunk. To see them gay and hilarious, with Uncle Ben in his best clothes looking so sad and worried with the arrangements, and the bustle of journalists and photographers, made Ethel cry too. There would be no more trains. It was the end.

Her Grace and *The Queen*, with the first-and-third-class coaches, were sold to a colliery company for use on their private pithead railway. The line itself and the stations were privately disposed of. Uncle Ben was allowed to remain at Dunworthy Station as a pensioner. His tall beans, his tomatoes, and his dahlias would be undisturbed. Only the signals, with their crazy white wooden ladders and their stable lanterns, remained to mark the course of the progressive idealism of Dunworthy people of seventy years ago.

Ethel went back to school the next day to finish her preparations for life. The future was dull and leaden. The new place on the by-pass was nearly finished, and young Jake was full of it. There would be constant hot water, an electric griller, and a vacuum cleaner. The more she heard about it the more she longed for the stained glass windows, the coal fires, and the tea-urns of a proper railway refreshment room. But Jake knew what was best, of course. Had he not said all along that the Dunworthy railway was doomed? Was he not from the first the apostle of progress, with his red bus and his ambitions?

'And I know my Jake's right, Ethel. Seven-and-six a week,

and the chance of a lifetime. Wish I'd had as much at your age.'

Ethel was an ordinary child. She missed the village fields at first, and the other children. She missed the interminable discussions in Uncle Ben's garden and the drowsy Dunworthy speech. Customers in the smart tea-room stamped about and spoke sharply. The long hours made her tired. The by-pass was dull, oh! more dull than a geography lesson. The seven-and-six a week, however, placed her on a different footing with everyone. She kept half a crown of it to spend, and found that it brought her the privilege of being grown up.

The fun had gone out of Uncle Ben now, though, as it had from much of that end of Dunworthy. Ethel was made to feel that nothing mattered but the petrol stations, the villas, the cinema, and the teashop where she worked.

'It's all over,' said Mr. Hocking, the blacksmith. 'It's busted. You'll never see no good-looking gals in Dunworthy, nor no cricket neither. If I was to mend punctures, maybe, and the missus to sell tea and stuff, we'd make a do on it. But I ain't going to do that at my time o' life. Me that's been an engineer and a master blacksmith!' He buried his head in one of Uncle Ben's large beer pots. People said he had been drunk since the day the railway closed.

'We all seen a bit of change,' said Uncle Ben, his eyes blank. He never looked beyond his garden now, not along the avenue of weeds where the rails had been. 'And I dare say our Ethel here'll see a lot more.'

'Aye. And a lot more bleedin' waste,' said Mr. Hocking sadly. 'Where did it all go? Good stuff, all on it. Damn sight better than them tin bone-shakers on the roads. Look at *His Grace*, still sitting down the yard with his boiler scraped and all—and I'd take a quid for him any day. I'd turn him into beer money, even though he was the finest job as ever rode on rails.'

A quid. Ethel's childishness and maturity fused in a great vision. At half a crown a week it would take her but eight weeks to save a quid. Eight weeks. . . . All her happiness was here. With *His Grace* at her back she would be secure once and for all from the superior knowledge of young Jake, the nagging customers in the tea-room, and the squalid overcrowding of home.

While Ethel worked, the life of Dunworthy went on undisturbed. She expected some days to see traces of excitement in people's faces, of doom in the autumnal lanes. Nobody shared her private thought, however. Nothing new happened to her, except for the glances of admiration from boys and men, who would look twice at a little slut of a waitress, where they disregarded a schoolgirl.

The moment came rather unexpectedly, after a football team had left tips. Ethel went round to Uncle Ben's in the evening and found both Mr. Hocking and Ezra drinking by the waiting-room fire. It had been said that none of them would see the winter through if things went on as they were.

'How's *His Grace*, Mr. Hocking?' she said timidly.

'Not doin' too well on account of this here damp rotten weather. It don't do steam engines no good, leaving 'em out night after night after night.' A sleepy hiccough betrayed him, and decided Ethel not to mince words.

'Do you still want to sell him for a pound?'

'Yes—why?' He heaved himself up in his chair.

'Here is a pound. I'll buy him,' said Ethel.

'But——'

'Take it, Mr. Hocking. It's beer money. You said you would. You can't change your mind.'

'What d'you say, Ben an' Ezra? I can't sell *His Grace* to a kid in pigtails.'

'I'm a working woman, Mr. Hocking, and I bin out of pigtails these four months. Here, take your pound!'

Uncle Ben and Ezra were unable to move or speak while Mr. Hocking took his pound. The idea of Ethel purchasing a full-sized locomotive! They had seen many strange things in life, and were prepared for the life to come, but not for this.

There was a long silence while Mr. Hocking stared at the eight half-crowns, and a voice kept screaming inside Ethel's head, 'The engine's yours! The engine's yours.' Then Uncle Ben, Ezra and Mr. Hocking all began to speak at once.

'But you can't, Ethel? What are you going to do with it? What will your Mum say?'

'That's for me to decide. You wanted a quid for the engine, Mr. Hocking, because you had it left on your hands, and I've given you a quid. Now *His Grace* belongs to me, and I shall do what I like with him.' The three of them nodded, and the wind rattled the windows of the waiting-room—the very same room where the Duke had himself once waited for the 9.49 a.m. Ethel had bought the engine: that was the end. People said that none of them would see the winter through.

She closed the door very quietly not to disturb them, and was out in the October rain. The dreaded winter, the leaden sky of the future, the garish draughtiness of the smart tea-room, diminished and lost importance. To own an engine!

Ethel made her way towards Hocking's yard in the gusty rain. She pushed open the wicket and listened to the splashing of the water from a broken gutter.

It was sad, sadder than the saddest graveyard, seeing *His Grace* alone there amid the paltry boilers, tanks and old iron. He stood erect and reposeful upon Mr. Hocking's siding as if it were the last strand of a noble kingdom. Ethel went very close and looked up. The D.R. in blue and gold was just discernible, and the rain dripped down runnels in the rust.

Holding her breath she climbed up into the driver's cab, a privileged place she had been permitted to enter but three times in her life. It was cold and wet there, the levers immobile, and the quaint windows blinded with dirt. It was her very own, her first possession, bought with her own money: the most desirable thing in the world.

'You *can't*, Ethel. Don't you see, you *can't*!' said Jake. 'And to go and polish the old rattlebox on your day off! It's, it's. . . .'

'It'll give the family a very funny name, if you ask me,' said Muriel, nursing her first-born. 'Never heard of a body doing such a thing, least of all me own sister.'

'Yes: and I shouldn't wonder but what they won't have something to say up at the tea-room. It's not everybody as ud do with a girl who's got a blooming steam engine. Might wonder what ud be going into their tea.'

'And what does Mum say about it?'

'Me? Why, it don't make no difference what I says. Her money's her money. Nobody can say but what I ain't a' done my best.'

'And what's it for, Ethel? That's what I want to know.'

'It's what it *is*, Jake: not what it's *for*.' Ethel was strong now.

'And what is it?' Jake thrust his ambitious chin at her. He was wide-awake, progressive, a man of the world; and he was rarely wrong. 'What is it, Ethel?'

'An engine,' she said, her eyes wide and lively, her little bust composed and stately.

The whole of Dunworthy, of course, discussed her purchase. She was pointed out when she bicycled to and fro: and at the funeral of Mr. Hocking there was something of a scandal because her presence distracted attention from the proper quarter. Then a very up-and-coming young newspaper correspondent at Wockton heard of it, and she was

photographed upon the footplate on her day out. He was a kindly young man: he seemed to understand her feeling about *His Grace*. He took it as a matter of course that she owned him: and then he went home, told his mother that he had a scoop, and wrote a story headed 'Waitress Buys Locomotive.'

That week Ezra died. In spite of the funeral, however, and the business of mourning, Ethel was persecuted by visitors. During the day they filled the tea-room: at night they swarmed in Mum's four rooms. Reporters, photographers, even cinemamen came. She had not been back from Ezra's funeral for two minutes when they packed her into a car and drove round to *His Grace*.

She photographed well, and everyone had to admit that she was a credit to the place. No money came her way; but she was enjoying happiness and satisfaction without any addition to her outlay of eight half-crowns.

Then on a cold blue December day a double worry presented itself, in Uncle Ben's being taken bad and in Mr. Kinlock. Everyone shook their heads over Uncle Ben: he had become a husk of a man, and his eyes were blank windows looking no further than the hedge and the Gothic temple, seeing nothing beyond. Everard K. Kinlock suddenly seemed to be everywhere at once.

Ethel gave him permission to examine *His Grace* while she was at work, and was surprised when he presented her with five shillings for this small kindness. When he added that he was willing to buy the engine, she laughed and said, 'Go on, Mr. Kinlock.' And she didn't give him another thought that day on account of Uncle Ben's ailment.

On the way home, as she stopped at the post office for some goose grease to rub on Uncle Ben's chest, Jake pulled up his red bus and called to her.

'What you bin and done with that engine, Ethel?'

'Why, nothing,' she said. 'I told you a dozen times, I'm doing nothing.' She felt very little standing there with her bike, talking up to Jake in his bus.

'Well, you're daffy, that's all, if you don't.' He roared off into the night, the passengers nudging one another and turning to look at Ethel, the more knowing ones even a little proud at being driven by Jake, the brother-in-law.

Before she reached the post office Mrs. Lussom was out to meet her. She gulped. 'Is it Uncle Ben?' she said, standing still.

'Uncle Ben?' cried Mrs. Lussom, taking her arm. 'Uncle Ben?'

'Is he . . . is he?' Ethel began to cry softly.

'God save us, Ethel, ain't you proud?' Mrs. Lussom bent over, and roared with laughter.

'No: why?'

'Ain't you heard?'

'What?' Uncle Ben must be all right. Mrs. Lussom was still laughing.

'Well, I never! Take a look at this, Ethel. Read what he sent to America—and it's the first time as I've sent one of them to America.' Upon the buff slip, in Mr. Everard K. Kinlock's scholarly writing, were a world-renowned address and the words:

Secured His Grace Unique Type of English Middle Period Loco stop For Presentation to Nation stop Kinlock.

'And he didn't even count the words, my dear. It might have been anything, from here to America. I suppose he's paying you handsome for it, Ethel?'

'He hasn't bought it yet: and I'm not selling.'

'But, Ethel. . . .' Mrs. Lussom was silenced by two wise eyes which set her protest at naught. For a moment Ethel stood there, hands on hips, and she breathed very deeply for one so small. Then she said:

'I must be off to Uncle Ben; and I'll take a jar of the goose grease for his chest, Mrs. Lussom.'

Mr. Kinlock sat on the edge of a chair at Mum's place, pink and very amiable because of the triumph that was his. Nothing could be done without Ethel: the engine was wholly hers, and he had no fears of dealing with an ignorant child. Throughout the world the name of Everard K. Kinlock was magic in connection with steam traction: he knew more about locomotive history than any man. He had saved unique engines from extinction. He had contributed to railway research and history in every civilized country. It was more than a hobby, he would say; it was a service rendered wholeheartedly to mankind in general and the American nation in particular. He was proud of it, and he knew its worth. He was prepared to make sacrifices. The family whispered on all sides of him, and the sharpness of the chair hurt him: but he was composed.

'I am prepared to buy your locomotive, young lady, and I am anxious to feel that you receive a reasonable—I may say a generous—price for it.' He nodded to the assembled family.

'Oh,' said Ethel, taking off her mackintosh. 'I'm not selling *His Grace*. I thought you said you only wanted to look at him. If I'd thought you wanted to take him to America, I'd have saved you the trouble of calling.'

'That's all very well, Ethel: and quite reasonable, I'm sure. I imagine that for, shall we say, sentimental reasons you are attached to the loco. I well imagine that. And that is just why I'm going to make you an offer which I'm sure your mother will agree will more than compensate you.'

'Ethel will take anything as she can get,' said Mum suddenly from the back of the room.

'Ethel will take a *reasonable* sum, that'll be worth her while,' said Muriel quickly. 'She ain't going to give the

thing away, now that it's bin in the papers. My Jake says——'

'All I got to say is that I'm not selling my engine.'

'Ethel.' The family, unable to forbear, clamoured about her: and Mr. Kinlock began to clear his throat very loudly, impatient to overcome this setback.

'The price I am offering,' he declared in a loud voice, 'is fifty pounds. Fifty pounds for your engine, Ethel.'

The thought of *His Grace* in the wind and rain, her engine for which she had paid a pound, arrested her. She faced Mr. Kinlock, who had sent a cable to America, and she repeated as boldly as she could:

'I'm not selling my engine. So there!'

She and Uncle Ben were the only two in the family who slept that night. Offers of fifty pounds, of a hundred, of two hundred pounds, haunted them. And whispers of these great events crept across the villages of Dunworthy, Worthy-Bo, and Wockton like a harvest wind in the ripe corn.

The mother of the up-and-coming young man in Wockton woke him as soon as she heard the rumour from the postman. He borrowed a motor-bicycle, and was with Ethel before Everard K. Kinlock had finished breakfast.

'Sit on it, Ethel,' he said. 'It's front-page news, this is. Everything you say and do is news. We'll stage it. We'll have photographs! A newsreel! Everard K. Kinlock making his offer, and the waitress accepting, tray in hand. How much further can you squeeze him? Another fifty? Waitress takes two hundred and fifty for pet locomotive.'

'But I'm not selling my engine.'

The young man gasped. He made her repeat it. Then he looked very wistful and stupid. He might just as well have stayed in bed: it was not the chance of a lifetime after all.

'So you're not selling?'

'I'm not selling my engine.' Ethel saw his dejection. He

looked so small in his mackintosh—almost as small as she herself.

‘But is that,’ she said, ‘is that very wrong, young man?’

‘My name’s Harold.’ He shook himself. He must battle a way out.

‘I thought you could still take my picture, with *His Grace*, even though I didn’t want to sell, er, Harold.’

‘Of course. Of course,’ shouted Harold. And then, quietly: ‘How clever of you to think of that.’

‘But I will sell if you think I ought to.’ She was charmed by this young man.

‘No, no, no. Better than that. Hold it off for a couple of days. Listen: ‘Waitress refuses big American offer for loco.’ Comes out terribly long, but it’s the goods. ‘Oh, Ethel!’ For a moment they faced one another. ‘You get the money, and I get the headline,’ murmured Harold.

‘Oh, Harold!’

That night it was in the evening papers: and Ethel took one to Uncle Ben. He alone of the family was calm.

‘You got the right feeling for engines, Ethel,’ he said. ‘I’m proud on yer. Now don’t you miss the money that’s coming, nor let go o’ that young Harold either. If you want to go and be one of they high-class serving gals in the buffet, now’s your time. I reckon as *His Grace*’ll be among friends.’

It was clear that Uncle Ben was sinking into his last sleep. His life had begun to ebb the day he hung up his station-master’s hat. Ethel’s news was making him happy. When he went—and *His Grace*—there would not be much left for her in Dunworthy.

‘I think I shall sell him to-morrow, Uncle Ben. And then I shall be able to look after you and rub your chest. I told Mr. Kinlock that I would think it over.’

Uncle Ben nodded. He liked the companionship of Ethel, his favourite niece: and he was not afraid of death. But Mr.

Kinlock, young Jake, Muriel, Harold, and a dozen strange, excited people awaited in and about Mum's parlour. When Mr. Kinlock began to plead, these others offered advice, took notes, photographs, and made such a racket that Mum talked of sending for the police. A well-dressed gentleman with a hoarse voice, who had not succeeded in making himself heard, finally stood upon a chair and addressed them all.

'Gentlemen. Ladies and Gentlemen. You must hear me because I stand for England: and you are allowing a matter of national moment to slip through your hands. Shall this young woman be coerced and panicked into letting her locomotive go into foreign hands, I ask you?'

'No!' cried everyone but Ethel.

'I speak with sincerity, gentlemen, and some authority. I am chairman of the British Locomanes Society: and I demand that an effort be made in this country to compete with the offer of five hundred pounds made by my old friend and adversary, Everard K. Kinlock.'

Everybody cheered: and Mr. Kinlock, who seemed not in the least put out by this speech, made one himself, praising the underlying friendliness of English-speaking peoples.

Both speeches were printed in full in the national Press, with photographs of all concerned. Ethel, focus of a world story, was in such demand that she had to abandon work to devote her whole time to being interviewed, cross-examined, and generally boxed about by everybody. Harold was never far from her side, however, organizing, advising, and fostering the national campaign.

The Locomanes said that it was a moral question, but they went as far as seven hundred and fifty pounds to outbid Mr. Kinlock. It was a matter of patriotism, they added, of honour. They appealed to Ethel as an Englishwoman. Everard K. Kinlock appealed to her as a woman of the world. 'It's happiness you need, Ethel,' he said, 'and your own way

of life. It's *your* engine. Nobody helped you to buy it: nobody encouraged you, or talked of patriotism then. The Great American People has nothing but admiration for your English heritage. We wish to preserve it, we are eager to maintain it. . . .'

'Just one thing, Mr. Kinlock. Do you know anyone in the railway station buffet business?'

'Why, no. Not in this country.' Mr. Kinlock, already regretting a boastful cable, hesitated, and made his second mistake.

'Oh,' said Ethel. 'I think I'd better talk it over with Uncle Ben.'


The goose grease, warm and lubricant upon his shoulders, cheered the waning spirits of Uncle Ben.

'You got tact, Ethel, and prudence when you asked that. The railways is a proper career for anyone with talents. For folks as cares for locomotives like yerself—and it's in the family—it's a job to be proud of. Now these here Locomanes; them's the fellows as should know of a nice refreshment room, on a junction perhaps, with a coal fire and a fine row of urns. . . .'

Harold handled the negotiations. The Locomanes with the support of the Press of the country, agreed to pay seven hundred and fifty pounds for *His Grace* in his present condition; and also, privately, that Ethel should have the benefit of their influence in obtaining a job with a railway company of repute as assistant bar-tender in a buffet.

She never saw the departure of *His Grace*, how they relaid three and a half miles of line to Wockton Junction in order to make an event of it, and to stimulate interest in England's heritage; how they declared him to be an unique example of English industrial craftsmanship and the pride of Dunworthy; how the Lord Lieutenant himself made a speech. She was fully occupied with nursing Uncle Ben until the end.

Dunworthy people see her now on a day's outing, where I see her occasionally and Harold sees her very often indeed. There is not much breathing-space to say more than 'Bitter, please, miss.' Ethel smiles when she serves you, going up on tiptoe to reach the clean glasses, and her arms are plump and pink and adept at managing four bitters at once and change. All the time she hears the coming and going of locomotives—at least one every five minutes throughout the day, they say, in this, London's busiest terminus.



George's Good Deed

HE WAS lucky to get the job. It came through Alice, who chared at the mansion flats, striking up an acquaintance with one of the porters. The porter was a smart young man, genial and accomplished: and he shouted down to Alice when she was upon her knees on the third landing:

'Ere Ma, like to take a little dawg for an outing?'

'I got 'em of my own,' she announced for the sake of saying something.

When she was putting on her hat and coat in the underground room, though, he popped his head round the door and said it again.

'What about taking a poor little dawg around the lamp-posts?'

'Whatcher mean?' He was often kidding, was Joe. He was smart, even for the mansion flats. 'Whose little dawg are you taken up with? I should have thought you'd other things on your mind.' Joe had a shameless passion for the tenant of number fourteen, a red-haired 'cellist. 'Or is it *her* little dawg what you want took out?'

'Number fourteen?' He looked down his nose. 'And since when have you seen number fourteen with a dog, Ma? No, it's number forty-nine, if you must know—the Lustards—they've got a little sausage dog, and she asked me if I knew someone as would take it out in the Park for them.'

'How much?' said Alice.

Joe shrugged his smart shoulders. 'Depends, don't it?'

'Well, Joe, I daresay my old man would be glad to oblige,

if it put him in the way of a bit. Lord knows we could do with it. . . .’

And so John Henry got the job of exercising Mrs Lustard’s dachshund, and a good job it was at one-and-sixpence a day.

Mrs. Lustard used to watch them across the road at first; wondering how safe her pet would be in charge of the man in the faded green overcoat. Then she asked herself if she were being self-indulgent in not herself carrying out this simple duty towards the little creature. Finally she consoled herself with the thought that she was doing her bit in helping the unemployed. After all the man’s need of one-and-six was greater than hers: in all honesty she felt that it was the least she could do to help, with wars and revolutions in the air, and people being allowed to march into the Park with flags on Sundays. She nodded when she passed the little charwoman in the passage: she was the wife. She must be glad of the bit of extra money.

John Henry was glad. He enjoyed walking across Lambeth Bridge in the mornings, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes curiously scanning the London scene which had once been so remote and desirable. He believed that his first money he had earned in London marked the turn of his luck, and that his old convictions and hopes about leaving home were right after all. Being paid one-and-six for exercising Mrs. Lustard’s dog was going to mark an important change. He had only to pocket the money and walk away with three-parts of the day his own, in which to find work.

So he arrived at the mansion flats all that week with a feeling of expectation. He smiled when Mrs. Lustard gave him instructions. He touched his cap as he led the little dog away. Mrs. Lustard was satisfied that he was the very person for the job.

‘But please remember one thing,’ she said. ‘I don’t like

him to be taken the same way every day. The little chap gets so tired of the same sights and smells.'

'Yes, M'm,' said John Henry, 'I should myself. There's nothing like a change for all of us.'

He passed Alice sometimes on the way out, on her knees scrubbing. He had never seen her at work before: and it worried him a little, seeing her in the public passages cleaning for anybody who cared to walk there. For a moment he wanted to slip off his coat and do it for her, as he would at home. She would laugh at him, and tell him off for allowing the little dog to run about with muddy paws. It interfered with his walk, however, to think of her stretching out her red hands beneath the feet of the little dog, of Mrs. Lustard, of the smart porter's patent leather shoes. It was his inability to find work which forced her publicly on to her knees: his lack of work. Alice, with three children, at the age of forty-seven, had no business to be working like that.

He invented a new way to take the little dog each day. He was conscientious, too, doing his distance at a good pace and pausing only at lamp-posts, curbs, and railings where the little dog had the best of everything. Money for jam, it was.

The crocuses nosed through; and nearly a week of steamy, callow mornings urged on the heavy lilac buds. Sometimes the sun strove through the haze and made John Henry screw up his eyes. Then he would walk more slowly, because the smell of things growing, even in a London park, snatched at his memory and brought the physical presence of his own home close about him. The little dog would tug at his lead, wishing the impossible, to be let off; to charge off through the tree and the enamelled chairs, and to feel serenity in his bowels. John Henry recalled himself to his duty never to undo the lead, and quickened his pace again, being conscious that a child of ten could do this job, and earn this money and feel proud of it.

'It's doing him good,' said Mrs. Lustard. 'And he seems to be getting quite fond of you. I think you might continue for the time being.' She found that she enjoyed helping people in this way.

John Henry looked searchingly at the little dog, that day, as they crossed into the Park. He wondered if he was really fond of him, if he thought at all of the man who led him out so patiently to ease his bowels, if the sleek awkward little body was capable of anything but self-interest. Passers-by sometimes cooed, chuckled, and attempted to pat this indifferent body, children occasionally smiled, dog-fanciers would nod knowingly at the extent of muzzle and the bandiness of legs. John Henry shook himself impatiently, shaking back his feelings, curbing himself. He had begun to despise the little dog, to hate his innocent self-complacency, to begrudge him his swaggers. His own self-respect vanished when he saw the first daffodils and the lambent grass in the sun. He was the servant of that arrogant little beast: the daffodils were gay only that *his* bowels might be glad; no children smiled at an anonymity in a green overcoat.

His own children, at home, accepted him as man and father. Alice had told them not to ask questions about his new job; they did not know that all his manliness and muscle was daily expended upon Mrs. Lustard's pet dog. What if they met him in the Park: what if some chance or adventure led them to spend a holiday going to the Serpentine? They had been forbidden to make the journey across the river, into the stately world of mansion flats. Nevertheless, he began to see their faces in all children's faces. He lowered his eyes as he walked; he gazed at the shiny rump of the little dog.

He hated this dog.

On the return journey another dachshund, a female, eager and jaunty, accosted them. The wagging of tails, the frank exchange of smell, the nosey effrontery of the encounter

snapped the patience of John Henry, jolted every feeling he had restrained. He tugged at the lead. He was resisted. He tugged again. Then he turned on his heel. He'd show the little beast! He'd give him something to think about! Still holding the lead, he kicked the little dog right off the ground, as if he were a football.

'Now do what you're bleeding well told!' he said.

'I'm very sorry,' said the little dog in a winded voice. 'But, of course, you never tell me anything.'

John Henry felt very sad. It was stupid to let himself go. He had kicked hard, spitefully, kicking with all the anger, resentment and shame which oppressed him.

'Why didn't you ever say anything?' he muttered as the little dog shook himself.

'Because you didn't seem to want company. You didn't even call me by my name.'

'Why no! What is your name?'

'It's George. Quite a sensible name. Though *she* never uses it: always calls me 'pet' or 'angel.' She's a stupid woman, isn't she?'

'Yes,' said John Henry. 'I'm glad you say that. She puts my back up, the way she carries on.'

George wagged his tail amiably. 'She's a bad woman all right,' he said. 'The only consolation I have is that I cost her twelve guineas, and I have never felt under an obligation to show the slightest sign of affection. I'm grateful to you for taking me out like this, though. I enjoy every moment of it, although I know it's a luxury really. At one time she used to take me herself, and that was very tiring for both of us.'

'Well, I'm paid to take you, you know. I'm very glad of the money. Not that I don't feel even more pleased now that I know you enjoy it.'

'It's absurd all the same, a big healthy man like you

parading round at the other end of my lead. I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself. . . .'

'Ashamed!' said John Henry emphatically. 'Sometimes I feel as if I had pinched something, as if I couldn't raise my eyes off the ground. It's not your fault, George, it's just—I couldn't get any other job.'

'And then you gave up trying.'

'These last few weeks, yes. I've chucked it altogether. If this is all I've got with three months in London, I don't care what happens in three years.'

They walked on, side by side, feeling the warmth of the spring sunshine upon their backs.

'You'd better chuck it, you know,' said the little dog. 'You're beginning to kid yourself that it's work. I like you very much, much too much to wish to see you become a part of the self-complacency of Mrs. Lustard. The whole thing is immoral.'

'That may be. But I know what I'm doing. I know when to stop. I admit I don't care to think of Alice, at her age, down on her knees scrubbing to keep the place clean for anybody to walk on. I admit I don't like to think of jobs I have done, and of work I hoped to do when I came here. But I shall know when to throw it up—when I see something better, something I'm not ashamed to do. I shan't want to deprive you of your walks but——'

'Don't worry about that, John Henry. Every little dog has to take some exercise you know, or there is bound to be trouble.' He chuckled: but John Henry felt sorry for him.

'Well, I shan't be leaving you for a while yet,' he said.

'You don't feel,' said George after a thoughtful silence, 'that a civilization that provides you with one-and-sixpence a day for saving the fat legs of Mrs. Lustard, when your whole desire and object is to use your brain and muscle to earn the dignity of a living wage, is the most despicably base

organization? You don't feel that you want to kick the blasted thing sky-high, like you kicked me just now? You don't feel an end of your miserable, long-suffering patience, John Henry?'

John Henry felt the warm sun upon his back, and the friendliness of his new companionship. It was better than the days at home had been, waiting for the vast prosperity of London to throw up a job, for the children to come home from school, for Alice to bring back a screw of money. No; any job was better than that: any humble toadying job which brought in one-and-sixpence.

'No,' he said, 'this is a good job and I'm sticking to it. It may be weak, but——'

They began to cross Knightsbridge and he was relieved that the noise of traffic carried his words away. The little dog had been right. John Henry had fought and struggled all his life to keep a simple dignity in his backbone. He was at the end of his youth now, earning less than he had earned in his 'teens, and he was afraid at the thought that his resistance was going the way of his youth. He had resisted because of Alice, because their marriage demanded that effort of him. Now he walked out of the park, his eyes lowered for fear of meeting those of his own children, his whole attention and bodily strength given to this little dog, because of Mrs. Lustard's one-and-sixpence a day.

'You're right, George. You're very sensible. But I've got past caring now. I'm afraid I'm content with what I can get. You give up hope, you see, when you make the great drive and come to London and then—nothing.'

'We shall see, John Henry,' said the little dog as they climbed the steps of the mansion flats. 'I'm no moralist, but I think I can do you a kindness, nevertheless.'

Next day John Henry thought about that conversation all the way to work. He wished he had never heard of Mrs.

Lustard. He loathed himself for looking forward to the pleasant quiescence of the park, the sunshine, and the almost country smells. Perhaps to-morrow he would refuse to go, perhaps to-morrow he would chuck back her one-and-sixpence and spend the day looking for a job. The little dog would applaud that. He would not mind missing his walk: they would soon find someone to take him. Just once more then, he would knock at Mrs. Lustard's door and touch his cap.

'So this is the way you do your work, is it?' Mrs. Lustard almost slapped him in the face. 'out of the kindness of my heart I provide you with work; easy, pleasant work: and quite evidently you have just done nothing. I suppose you've passed the time idling round the corner while this poor little dumb beast has been denied the merest decencies of nature. He cannot have been more than two or three yards at a time when he is reduced to *this*!'

With a rhetorical gesture she pointed to a corner of the carpet. 'Poor thing, to think how he must have suffered before he allowed himself—before he was forced to it. Poor little dog!'

George lay upon the hearthrug modestly feigning sleep.

'I'm sorry, M'm,' said John Henry, 'but——'

'I want no excuses, my man. If you are incapable of carrying out such a simple job honestly, you are no use to me. I shall not want you again.'

The faintest applause from the dachshund's tail as it thumped upon the fender, and John Henry was out of the room. Then his blind red anger at his humiliation was checked by the recollection of the little dog's parting words of the day before: 'no moralist . . . but I think I can do you a kindness nevertheless.'

As he strode back across the river with nothing at all in his right-hand pocket, he held his head up and whistled, thinking kindly of the little dog, George.

The Heirs

THE FRIDAY was decisive: to be remembered by everyone as 'the day he was brought down to the front room.'

Nobody had the strength to resist him over it. They said that he would miss the view, that the autumn was a bad time and even that he would soon be better. Nobody had the strength of mind to say outright that he was the very devil of a weight—and at his last gasp.

It took them three-quarters of an hour to bring him down, and it nearly killed him. 'Must have been putting on weight for years,' they said among themselves. He overheard them, of course, and laughed, with something of his usual spirit. Been putting on weight for years, he thought, that's half the trouble with my family. He remembered his father and his grandfather. Fat men, yes, traditional fat men, portentous figures.

'You won't have all the trouble getting a heavy coffin round the bends of the stairs, now I'm on ground level.'

'Oh, Mr. Jettson, don't say that!' They kept up the game—Fanny's game—of not mentioning death in his presence.

He laughed. He felt better for being downstairs. He knew that Fanny would weep in the conservatory about his having said 'coffins.' He didn't care if she did. To anticipate death, to joke about funeral arrangements, or even to mention the quality of coffin wood was too harrowing for Fanny, and in doubtful taste too. She would edge away, retreat somewhere, to the aviary or the rock garden, wherever she could readjust herself with trifles of fixed and certain value.

'Where's my young woman?' old Jettson demanded. 'Tell

her that I want to face out of the window, so that I can see the rickyard. And don't whisper. I'm not dead yet.'

'Margery's gone into Steadley,' they said. 'It's her afternoon off. Mrs. Jettson's coming, though.'

'Tell her not to worry. Young woman'll be back before dark, and I don't want to be fussed over.'

They had to be very quiet now at the back of the house for fear of disturbing him. But then, they thought, it can't be for long. What with his weakness and his relapses, it can't be long. And the winter coming on won't help him either. It will be a wonder if Stephen returns in time to see him alive.

Yes, it will be a wonder, he thought. But then it's a wonder that I've ever wanted to see Stephen back. It surprised me as much as it did them. Quite suddenly I felt that I should have him back. Was it curiosity? No, it was a feeling of rightness, of having the first-born close at hand. What will he be like after ten years, working for his living, away from Steadley, away from England? He was quite a boy, at the end of the War. Even now he would be reckoned a young man . . . and he always carried his age. Not like William, who was middle-aged at twenty.

Sending for Stephen was a last resort, they said. Nobody had liked to refuse: though William had said that it was a senile whim, and perhaps a guilty conscience, after his having shown Stephen to the door ten years ago. Margery and Doctor Forsett had put advertisements in the newspapers, though one would have thought that it was William's job as next in succession. But William was busy with the negotiations for the new road, and with his work on Steadley District Council. He was annoyed when he saw the advertisement, because he said it was badly worded. It read:

Jettson. Will Stephen Jettson, eldest son of Mr. Jack Jettson of Steadley, please communicate with those at Steadley House on matters of an urgent nature.

At tea, when Fanny and Margery and young Simon were there, he complained about it.

'You could have done with one less Jettson,' he said. 'And I don't see the need to mention Steadley House. It's wasting words. It would be just as easy to understand, too.'

'You must spend your life sending imaginary telegrams,' said Margery.

'He does,' said Simon. 'To imaginary bookmakers. It saves him the cost of losing money on horses.'

Fanny sighed. 'I'm sure it's all for the best,' she said. 'And I must say I thought Nurse worded it rather nicely. I mean it was in good taste. After all, Stephen may be very particular. We don't know what he's like, do we?'

'This may not be the moment to discuss details, but I'd like to know just when the family decided to advertise for Stephen. It seems to me that you and Nurse and Simon decided it among yourselves and told me as an afterthought.'

'We only did it to annoy you, William,' said Simon.

'I'm sure you did.'

'Do have a little consideration for Nurse, you two. It's so thoughtless when she has gone out of her way to help us on her afternoon off. . . . And I've so many things to think about now.' Fanny had forgotten to pour out second cups again. They saw that it would be better to change the subject. Even William avoided tears at tea.

'We had a most successful meeting on the new road,' he said. 'I really think we're educating the people at last.'

'Whatever your views are, William, I think it's very wrong of you to air them in the house; when you know that they will only give pain . . . and if your father were to come to hear of them I don't know what would happen. . . .'

'Well, Mother, my views are my views. I've been a member of Steadley District Council for seven years, and if I can be trusted with the local government of Steadley, surely

I can express an opinion in the freedom of my own home. It's not upsetting the Guv'nor. . . .'

'It is upsetting him. Everything like that upsets him if he hears of it. It's so, isn't it, Nurse?' Fanny made her appeal as a matter of course.

Margery nodded dutifully. 'If he hears it,' she murmured.

'It must be dull for Margery,' said Simon, 'hearing the details of your devotion to the public service, William.'

'I must go to Mr. Jettson,' Margery rose. She was tender, and a little fragile out of her nurse's uniform. Simon saw the petal blue veins at her temples.

'Are you going to town this evening, Margery?' he said casually, conscious of the naturalness of his voice.

'It depends,' she said, 'on him.' She stood in the doorway. She, too, was natural. She looked from Simon to William.

'Isn't it about time you were off to work, Simon?' Fanny mustered her fussy, motherly concern. What a nuisance it would be if there was a situation about the nurse. Such a good nurse, too.

'A little game of work, eh, Simon, me lad!' William moved towards the door, too, playing the hearty elder brother.

'I'd think of a joke about your occupation, William, if you had one.' Simon watched his brother's self-confidence sag. He too turned in the doorway. He was ponderous and gentlemanly, like an expensive oil-painting, in his tweeds and his yellow waistcoat.

'Playing in a dance band, if you call that work, doesn't improve your manners, Simon.'

'Please, please, William, don't shout like that. If your father were to hear what Simon was really doing. . . .'

'He'd know that for all his fancy education Simon is no musician.'

'Nonsense, William. Simon says there are several men in the band who know quite a lot about music.'

Simon began to laugh—nobody understood why—and William banged the door.

Simon faced his mother across the table. 'Well, how is he, Mother? Any better for being in the front room?'

'About the same, my dear—about the same.' Nurse had said he was a little better; but his 'being the same' had become her habitual reply.

'Oh! the same is he? . . .' Simon rose from the table, dismissing the question.

'Simon, dear, you sound almost disappointed.'

'Disappointed? No. Why should I be? I'm taking a reasonable interest, no more, no less. It is inevitable, and not even very tragic.'

'It's been so long.' She allowed herself to swallow hard with self-pity. She knew better than to argue with Simon.

'Very long.' He was fidgeting, standing behind her, by the window. Why didn't the boy say something to her at a moment like this, when they were alone together? Why did he never say the dutiful conventional things? Two tears fell into her tea. She added two knobs of sugar.

'When you're my age, Simon, you'll know what it is to suffer and to wait.'

'Don't say it again, Mother.' He shifted his hands in his pockets, jingling keys. Why didn't he face her? She preferred scenes *vis-à-vis*.

'Well, I'm sure I only say it for the best.' But he was out of the door before she had finished the cliché.

As soon as her husband had begun to talk about death, and she had seen that he would die, she had plunged into spurious activities, deceiving the days, deceiving the hours, but leaving her with intolerable minutes on her hands. 'We must all keep smiling,' she had said. 'Everything must appear to go on as usual; and, of course, *he* mustn't be worried.' For a week or so she had taken on a new importance. The

doctor reported to her, William took her into his confidence about the new road, and she had the discussions over the whereabouts of Stephen. A few more days, however, found her leaving things to Margery, the trained nurse. William thought her ignorance of local politics tiresome.

And Stephen could not be found. Neither Aunt Tilly, the Old Comrades Association, nor the Semphire Club knew about him. The old man grew glum and irritable. Nobody else mattered; he had set his heart on seeing Stephen.

'But you said, dear, that you'd never want to see him again,' Fanny had said.

'That may be. Plenty of people change their religion on their death-bed.'

'Don't, Jack, please, don't talk like this. Now that you're down in the front room you'll probably feel much better. You were so keen on coming down. . . .'

He shrugged his shoulders, dismissing her. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she left the room. She didn't think he was better.

Then he looked out of the window of the front room on to the rickyard. He was feeling better.

He allowed his mind to travel on farther, across the Home meadows. The grass was still stubbly from the hay being late. It sprang back against boot leather with just enough of a click to scare the rabbits. He imagined himself walking there with William at this time of year. There would be a row about the hay crop being late. William would be resentful, but crafty, blaming everyone but himself, every circumstance but his own lack of interest. William was a fool, as a man with at least half his life before him he should have more drive.

He imagined that he stood by the coppice, listening to the snap of the dry undergrowth as the dogs hunted through it. Yes, William was a fool, a mean fool. His mind was obsessed

with small money-making schemes such as the milk-round, the poultry, or the letting of the cottages. He suffered and worried like a shopkeeper. Then he would scheme about the new road, and the betterment values which would accrue. William, with his seat on the Steadley Council, thought of little but betterment values.

He would have the typical row with William, there in the Home meadows, in the rank afternoon mist. But as he was denouncing him, the dogs would put up a covey of partridges. He would have his gun up then without bothering to finish his sentence. William was not accustomed to carry a gun; but he would stand, holding the shot partridge like a keeper.

The rickyard grew dark. Old Jack Jettson watched every shadow with recognition, without sorrow. He smelt the autumnal evening without flinching, the smell of the body of the earth. Slowly he rested his hand on his thigh beneath the bed-clothes. He felt his own strength; he felt in communion with that body of the earth. An instinct, which he would never have attempted to explain, satisfied him that the front room was where he should be. At last he brought his mind back to Stephen. He wanted Stephen again as a son.

It was one of the years when he had let the hay crop go. Stephen and William were back from the War: and they all talked about starting a stud at Steadley. Word for word he went over the scene there had been when Stephen went.

'Yellow-bellied old gamekeeper . . . bloody shame the War ended . . . for you sportsmen at home. . . . You'd like to shoot 'em on the run if you'd been young enough? I know! You'd see that every hero has his chance . . . especially your own blood. Heroes! The only heroes were the close old catch-pennies, who dodge and squeeze, and vote and make damn good sure they have their reward. . . .'

The family whispered and whimpered when Stephen went. They thought it was quick temper on both sides, but they

agreed that Stephen had been violent and incomprehensible.

You could only meet violence by violence. Stephen was not only violent, he was dangerous. He talked like a Bolshevik. He sneered at property, at family life, at Steadley itself. He had meant it when he said to Stephen, 'Never come back.' He had three sons: he had a third of a lifetime: he had Steadley. Now he looked out at the dark rickyard with resolute eyes. It meant injustice to the others, humiliation to the family, and a climb-down on his part; but he must have Stephen in at the death. Stephen had been incomprehensible, but he was hard and honest—ten years ago. Not mean like William, immature like Simon, shrinking like Fanny.

When the doctor called, he said that worry would kill him quicker than anything else. They must find Stephen.

Margery suggested broadcasting an S O S; and that was agreed after a solemn family discussion. It would infuriate the old man to know that he was being advertised as dangerously ill, and they decided not to tell him.

When Margery had washed him that evening, however, he was more alive than ever.

'What's been happening to-day, Margery?'

'The usual family arguments. And William talked about the road, of course.'

'What does William say about it now?' The old man looked forward to these evening confidences more than anything in his sick-room routine, and Margery's firm cool fingers imparted the power of life.

'William says that it is now a matter of national importance, affecting the lives of thousands of people. He can hardly stop talking about it.'

'You know, Margery, I'm glad I never liked William. I may have made hasty judgments in my time, but I could always twig a hypocrite. "Affecting the lives of thousands,"

he says. And he means affecting the pockets of a little bunch of landowners, speculators, and shopkeepers of which he imagines himself the principal one.'

'He is the principal one, in a sense, if the new road comes through Steadley House. . . .'

'It won't. Not while I'm alive; and if it did, where is William? He's assuming that he will be in my shoes, I suppose. He's reckoning not only on being here in Steadley, which was quite enough for his forefathers, but he wants to see it enhanced, as a garden city, or a suburb. "A development" is his favourite term.' Old Jettson grunted complacently as Margery dried him. He had opposed the road for three years. At first he had local opinion behind him. He had been accustomed to leading local opinion. New people were arriving, however. There was a sugar factory: a motor-car assembling works: cheap shops: cinemas: building estates in Steadley village. Let the road go south by Mumbery, he had said. Let it cut across the old brickfield, and Little Steadley which was nothing but a slum; or, better still, let the old road, across the end of Steadley High Street, serve. The construction of a new one brought no profit or safety to the people of Steadley. The new people showed no interest at first. They were not on the Council, they had not bought the local newspaper. Twelve months later, however, they began to express views about the new road. It was essential, they said; it brought employment, it developed Steadley. 'Who wants development?' cried old Jettson at a meeting. 'We do.' The new people, with new interests, new ideas, business men, traders, labour men, technicians, people who took electric light for granted and desired wireless sets, telephones, 'bus services, recreation grounds. They did not see why the new road should not go through Steadley House land. It would be cheaper. It would improve the north side of Steadley where their own building developments had taken

place. A firm called Harrison Town Planning Ltd. had bought land close to Steadley in anticipation of this development. The directors were called Cohen and Macnaughton. They had offered old Jettson a directorship. He had not replied to their messages. But William had invested what money he had saved in this concern. He was a kind of partner. He went to their offices furtively. Old Jettson had known it from the beginning. It was part of William's nature to be sly.

'Now I think you'd better have the light out, Mr. Jettson.' The firelight played upon Margery's shining white uniform, gilding it, rich and golden, autumnal.

'Call me Jack, my dear, when we're alone.' He needed the girl's sympathy. It was not only that she reminded him of nursemaids who had put him to bed upstairs sixty years ago. He saw in her firelit body the warm virtue of a dozen women who dwelt in those sixty years. He was content that they were there; he yearned for them no longer. She was smiling.

'Yes, Jack. But it sounds—funny.'

'It may sound funny—to you.' He paused, and Margery thought to herself how wise he was. He pointed to the chair. 'Now tell us, Margery, what else happened to-day? William make love to you?'

'Yes, almost enthusiastically.' She enjoyed these confidences too. Very few of her patients had been so shrewd.

'Did he now? Well, it only goes to show that William is human. And what about young Simon?'

'He's a dear.'

'How is he doing in that terrible job with the dance band?'

'He's finding his feet, is Simon. Remember how much younger he is than William. Nearly another generation.' She felt vaguely that it was necessary to defend Simon. Why? It made old Jettson smile.

'They daren't tell me about the dance band. It's one of the many things they think will kill me. The idea of Simon doing a job of work, hard regular work, is too much for the family.' He snorted with laughter. 'You ought to marry Simon,' he said.

'I don't think he wants me.' She stood still in the firelight, firm and fine as one of the Steadley trees.

'Make him, Margery.'

'I don't think you know Simon. You think him callow, vague, unsportsmanlike. The truth is that you judge him by wrong standards. He does not belong to Steadley like the rest of you. It is not only his generation—and mine—which is different. It is something more. I can see it in him: he has left Steadley. He lives elsewhere, in a flat, a restaurant, or a car. You cannot force Simon . . .'

'Ah! but disillusionment, my dear. . . .'

'Simon has no illusions. Nor have I.'

Old Jettson pressed her young hand. 'You are a good Margery,' he murmured, much as he would have spoken to one of his fillies. He no longer dreaded the blurred edges which the last month's sickness had brought.

'Are you making a broadcast S O S for Stephen?'

'Yes,' she said, quietly dropping back into her nurse's authority. 'And now you must go to sleep, in case he hears it, and comes back to-morrow.'

'To-morrow.' He closed his eyes and slept.

Driving through the woods toward Steadley village, Simon envied the rabbits hopping out of the headlights. He envied them the damp woods, the familiar rustlings, the smells. As he turned a corner and saw the rows of lamps shining in the High Street he laughed at this nostalgia, the infallible wisp of sentimentalism which afflicted him whenever he drove to work.

In another moment he was envying the workpeople

streaming down High Street because they had finished for the day, and were going to small warm homes, to listen to the wireless or fall asleep. He cursed his mood. He cursed his craving for cosiness, his mother's instinct for small final things. He told himself that he should have grown out of it, gone away from Steadley, started a new life of his own.

These few months he had been full of thoughts and desires about a new life. It was secret, it exposed compromises: his home, his job, his activities. He raged with contempt at his impotence, and contempt divided and subdivided even this passion. In the middle of Steadley High Street he came to the conclusion that he was the most complicated young man in existence.

Margery made matters worse.

On the main road, splashed with wet yellow light, he drove mechanically and skilfully towards London, telling himself that he was not in love with her. He looked splendid when the light caught his face, masking his features with pale severity, curving his strange wide nostrils and his too full lips. That very same intent look, when he was driving, had left his mark already on Margery.

He was in love with love, he decided, when he desired Margery. He had felt *that* so often, that movement of his whole body, physically saturated with an idea. He had enjoyed it over and over again, since he was sixteen. He had not hesitated to satisfy it. He loved women. Yet he singled out Margery again and again; and he was not sure if he dare kiss her. Where was his courage? Why not take her away and start—what?

She was playing the bitch, was Margery. Quite deliberately she let herself fit into the Steadley environment. She accepted everything, she behaved well. She allowed William to take her out on the sly. She had motored home from London twice with Simon. She was too shrewd not to know what she

was doing. William had probably taken her to Maidenhead.

Simon smiled at the idea. William always took girls there. He did not seem to function till he arrived at Maidenhead. Simon remembered when he went with him—as a gesture to show that he was grown up. They had taken a couple of girls out in a punt. But whenever William pinched his girl to start things going, she screamed as if she was being killed.

Nevertheless, driving into London, he was jealous of William, and, in his metropolitan mood, contemptuous. For he was pleased that he himself belonged to London, and William represented an obsolete value, a mouldering and dishonestly maintained *status quo*—hostile, of course, to the new life.

He would rescue Margery.

That was where his detachment vanished. When he arrived for his rehearsal at the 'Earthworks Club' that evening he did not know whether he wanted a rescue, a woman, or an amorous adventure.

The 'Rhythm Boys' sat round, trying their new numbers, their sleek heads nodding in time with their cheap pointed shoes. This tapping of their feet as they beat out the time often absorbed Simon's attention as he sat at the piano, playing mechanically. At first he had been afraid that they would send him out of his mind, these animated, inarticulate feet. Every day they assembled from Dalston, from Shepherds Bush, from Balham, from Berwick Street. Every day they assumed characteristic postures, losing family identity. They were the humble menials of the 'Rhythm Boys,' at once serving them and making them objects of ridicule.

They argued about the tempo and the arrangements. Simon sometimes wrote out fresh parts. They warmed up. It was a good rehearsal.

Then they changed and went out for a drink. They ceased to be slick boys. Barney had been summoned again about his

car. He imitated the people in the police court. Simon laughed and even as he did so, he wondered what Margery would think of Barney. How was it he could go straight from one to the other and be whole? He was fond of Barney, because he was gay and cared only for money and fishing.

Then they had their supper and listened to the news on the saloon bar radio.

S O S for Jettson.

Simon shook his head to their inquiring looks: he shrugged his shoulders: he stood up and lit a cigarette. He could not speak because tears suddenly came. For a moment the quiet of Steadley had filled the bandroom. In the red and silver of the 'Earthworks,' that fashionable resort, the heavy breathing of the old man, and the light tread of Margery, made a stillness, a pathos which desolated him.

'Yes, they're cousins of mine,' he said at last, his eyes on the ground. The feet of the Rhythm Boys shifted uneasily. They knew he was lying. Joe Barber, the accordion player, murmured something about doubling if he were called away suddenly.

Simon looked down at his pale blue dress clothes and wondered if Stephen had listened to the S O S. It was known that up to a few years ago he was in London. Where was he now? Would he telephone and would Margery answer at Steadley?

As soon as they began to play, he let his mind wander through the framework of the rhythm into a pleasant plastic blankness. His clever little pianistic touches, for which he was becoming famous, occurred automatically. He was unused to the word 'Stephen Jettson.' It had been a shock to hear the name, spoken impersonally by the announcer.

He was only seven when Stephen left Steadley. He remembered having carried his shoes up to him in the morn-

ing because the War had left them short of servants. Stephen was shaving. His body was smooth and astonishingly fair, smelling sweetly of shaving soap, but harsh also like the farm labourers'. He had never seen a man stripped to the waist. He had blushed as he set down the shoes.

'Put 'em here,' Stephen had said, 'not near the door.' He had bent down, very much in awe of the expanse of shining back. He had shuddered when he saw the few inches of thick hairy leg protruding from the pyjama trousers. A sudden kick sent him rolling over on the carpet. 'You're a good batman, Simon, eh!' The giant had roared soapily and set him on his feet again.

'Yes, Stephen.'

'Thank your lucky stars, little brother, that you've missed one kind of humbug. And now you've a brand new world. A new start. But never forget, the old folks won, the old folks with sullen, mean guts.'

Simon had remembered it all, though at the time he had thought that Stephen meant the Germans.

He watched the narrow faces and the bland eyes of those taking supper in the smart 'Earthworks Club': and pitied them. These people, many of them, were the fruit of that dim world of 1919. They were transitory. They knew it. They were no safer than the little dance hostesses who landed on the open streets sooner or later. Where was Stephen? Had he made compromises with these years of standstill, of decay?

The first cabaret came on; and Simon waited for the green spotlight to give him the cue for his solo. He played one of his own syncopated compositions. It was admired as usual, his quick movements and his intent look. Several people came and offered him drinks in the interval afterwards. Barney said he was a fool not to make use of the less compromising offers he received.

He was determined that he would walk out in the middle of it one of these days—when he knew where he was going. A man with brown eyes smiled at him insolently. He smiled back with contempt; and then he smiled at Nita, Lady Gressop, who adored him.

‘Spect you’ll be off and ring up about your S O S,’ said Barney. ‘I’ll put some grub aside for you in the band-room, shall I?’

‘Thanks, Barney. Yes, I think I will telephone. I want to ring up a young woman. . . .’

Margery would answer. Talking to her would wipe off the filth of Lady Gressop’s smile. It would arm him against the nausea and weakness he felt from having heard the S O S.

‘Hello, Margery. I’m lonely. I thought I’d surprise you.’

‘You’re the second. Stephen has been on . . .’

‘When!’ His heart leapt. It was strange.

‘Just after the broadcast.’

‘Well?’

‘He said he will come. He is in London.’

‘Margery.’ Stephen could wait.

‘Yes. I must go. Your father won’t go to sleep now.’

‘You sound lovely.’

‘So do you.’ She cut off. She had meant it. She would toss her red hair and smile. She had once said that he had a lovely nose, in just that tone of voice, meaning it. ‘Aesthetically, of course,’ she had added.

He stood outside the ‘phone box and chatted to Lady Gressop.

‘Somebody’s ‘pageing’ you,’ she said.

‘They know where I am,’ he said, wary of one of the Gressop practical jokes.

But she was right. The porter cried out ‘Mr. Jettson, please,’ close to them. ‘Yes, sir, on the telephone, please!’

As Simon stepped towards him he found himself face to

face with a man with insolent brown eyes. 'I'm Jettson,' the man said angrily.

'But I . . .' Simon was too amazed to finish. This man glaring at him was Stephen Jettson, elder brother and one-time hero. The porter pushed in front of him. 'Not for you,' he said, nodding to Simon.

'Are you Stephen?' Simon faced the tall angry man.

'Who the hell are you?'

'Simon Jettson.'

'In the band?'

'Why not?' So it was to be family pride.

Stephen smiled. His voice was like the old man's. 'Let me take my 'phone call,' he said. 'It's Aunt Tilly, I expect.' Saying this, he demolished their reserve. Simon blushed like a boy.

He was playing a rumba when Stephen returned, stared at him insolently again, and had his supper table moved as close to him as possible.

The next day Stephen woke early and glanced at Simon, inert and very pale, lying on a sofa in grey flannel trousers and an eiderdown.

'One of the Rhythm Boys,' he murmured. 'Poor little devil!' He touched the black hair and fancied a slight warmth from it. 'All that talk about Steadley and a new life. Thank the Lord, we both had plenty to drink. Perhaps he won't remember it; then we shan't have to talk about it again for two or three days.'

Stephen was often frank with himself in the early mornings. Coming home from the 'Earthworks' he had resolved to have plenty to drink to improve the sudden acquaintanceship. He realized now that it was precipitate retreat from his usual self-confidence. The circumstances of the meeting with Simon, after his overwhelming curiosity to get in touch with Steadley, had panicked him.

He wished that it had not been Simon on whom he had fixed his attention while he sat having supper at the 'Earth-works.'

The new life! He would retreat again: retire before Simon woke up to feel wretched from his hangover. Later they were to drive down to Steadley. About that he enjoyed his curiosity, now that he knew how the land lay. He looked forward to seeing the old man, the old brigand. And Steadley would be the same! The same frosted pallor of the Home meadows, within their circle of trees. The farm-yard smell; and the smell of guns and leather as you went into the front room. He savoured the pleasure of returning. It had never occurred to him before that he would want to go back.

Simon slept on, his wide lips parted, his thick hands languid and warm on the coverlet. 'When he wakes up he will despise me,' said Stephen, 'I shall become a relative, a family necessity, about whom much will be known and more taken for granted.' Hurriedly he wrote a note and placed it on the coverlet.

Back in an hour's time. Take anything you want and ring for my man. My name remember, is Pardon. Occasionally I take messages for my friend Jettson.—S.

He locked the doors of his bedroom and his study, told the man not to disturb Simon, and left the flat. He was looking worried. It worried him that this boy was his brother, that he had talked savagely and uncompromisingly, with resolution in his eyes, mocking the quiet, luxurious flat.

He crossed Piccadilly Circus and opened the door of Pardon's Matrimonial Agency, alarming everybody by appearing so early in the morning.

'I've come to pack up for a few days, Laura,' he said.

'Business or pleasure?'

'Family.'

'Not in your line, surely?' She thought he was lying. 'It's a busy time just now, Stephen; but if it's a job you're on, you'll go, I suppose.'

'Yes, I'll go; and you'll do what you're told.' The little Jewess flushed with anger. Then she shrugged her shoulders. He was boss, she supposed. He continued: 'You'll carry on while I'm away, Laura. I shall be out of touch. This week's *Ladybird* go through all right?'

'Here.' She picked one from the pile. On the cover was a picture of a pleasantly proportioned bathing girl sitting down by a cactus. Stephen held it out.

'Fair. Though I think his colours are a bit sheepish.' He flicked over pages. 'Advertisements aren't going off, are they?'

'Anything else you can find wrong?' Laura sneered; but she was proud of the commercial success of *Ladybird*. 'I wonder you're not afraid to go away for a few days. We might go bust or get pinched.' She snatched it out of his hands.

'More likely to get pinched,' said Stephen with a sigh.

'I shall stand the racket,' said Laura fiercely.

'How's the matrimonial?'

'Slack. And if the 'Fellowship' and 'Get Together' don't show a better return by Christmas, we shall have to reorganize. Matrimonial business doesn't do on its own these days. . . .'

'Cheer up, old thing.' He had been through difficulties with Laura. Pardon's Matrimonial Agency Ltd., 'Fellowship' and 'Get Together' Circles Ltd., and *Ladybird* were monuments to their co-operation. 'Cheer up, Laura. You've not done badly. Five years, isn't it?'

'Stephen, you're talking just as if you were about to quit—instead of going for a few days. Steve, you're not quitting?' All her vivid colours rushed at him.

That was it. He might be.

He looked into her eyes. She was eager, frightened; the tough business woman gone. She loved him. Yet she hardly understood love, in her virgin, sensual body.

'No, I'm not quitting.' He laughed. He echoed the laugh of old Jack Jettson. He strode into his inner office with the natural ease of a Jettson. He worked for half an hour. The business was a large one; he spent the time making sure there was no remaining connection between Pardon and Jettson. He found only one old agreement in the safe. He burnt it.

Then he sat very still at his desk, recalling word by word the conversation which had taken place with Simon.

'You've always been an idea, Stephen, an idea connected with my growing up. You made a choice. You went away from Steadley. God knows who you are or where you went. You left behind a legend. I grew up with that legend. I felt the world changing outside Steadley; I believed in general in that changing world. Yet nowhere was it solid—except where you left that legend.'

'You can't expect me to live up to that. . . .'

'I don't care whether you live up to it or not. I realize—I've been away working, you see—I realize that half the people have changed, a new heart, a new consciousness, the sparks of a new faith. It began with you men from the War. I remember you saying 'mean guts, the old.' I have been waking up, Stephen, myself. . . .'

'Have a drop more brandy, Simon.'

'I'm tight already. A poem, you know. . . . You must know. . . .'

"Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own,
Though the roads have almost vanished and the expresses never run."

And you know it finishes:

"If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try . . ."

Must know it, Stephen.'

He had had too much brandy, which was just as well. All his nobility had died, his burnished skin had blanched. He had asked no more questions.

Mr. Pardon surveyed his office. His maps, his Munich beer mugs, his trophies from the Riff war, excluded the small clamminess of *Ladybird* and the kindred subjects which occupied his time there. Mr. Pardon was not a mean character. He was a strange compound of generosity and acumen. When he looked at him in the mirror Stephen rarely despised him.

He took out his three keys and laid them on Laura's desk in the outer office. 'So long. I'll ring you if I'm delayed.' She glanced at the keys. They gave access to everything in his room. He wished she had taken that frightened look off her face.

'So long,' she said.

Shaking off Mr. Pardon, he walked down Shaftesbury Avenue. He felt the keen autumn morning through his clothes. They were dressing the shop-windows. He paused and surveyed an array of mauve dresses. They were painted like dolls upon the morning light; in the afternoon perhaps they would be fleshed; in the evening they would walk out alive. He, Stephen, faced himself in the mirror of the shop-window. He would walk out, alive—for a few days. He had relinquished Mr. Pardon's control. For five years he had been the business man. He had almost lost sight of old John Mercury, the adventurer. Funny, how he fancied himself in that character. He had enjoyed having the power—that was what was at the back of it. He had needed the singleness of

the attachment, the singleness of the moral definition. John Mercury was a noble character—an easy nobility. In his locked study he still had a book of press cuttings—in three languages—about that fine character, the dangerous and adroit figure who appeared mysteriously in North Africa in the 'twenties,' upholding lost causes. It had been difficult to drop it. The causes collapsed, first of course, the moral precision vanished. Then there was impotence. From Marseilles he had tramped up through France. A job as a courier took him into Germany, into that constrained, hysterical Germany of the early nineteen-thirties.

What a land for the young, it had been! He recognized symptoms of hysteria, but he let them pass. He found himself enjoying the brassy restless defiance of things past: the treading of the ashes of spiritual pretence; the mockery of a regime of war and famine. He found a new aesthetic, a new passion of a physical order. He was in love: he had declared that it was a pure pattern, a form of blazing, blinding, physical integrity. He identified himself with it, leaning over the ramparts of Schoenburg, elbow to elbow with Karl, who admired him because of the courage of his adventures.

'You are English, Stefan: you will help us to build. You will be frank with us, you will teach us. We will forget, your country and mine, the misunderstanding, the doubt. We are one. You and I understand this. It is as if we had fought side by side, not opposite. Look down there, the swimmers, how straight, how fine they are! . . . You might have been killing them with a machine gun, you might have . . . killed me. But now . . . it will never happen again. You and I, Stefan, blood brothers . . .' And so on.

It had ended suddenly in Berlin, after a political meeting. The physical splendour, the dreams, the world socialism turned his stomach. The substance of it all was negative, an earnestness, a thickening of the neck, a submissive self-

conscious democracy. It had ended with a revolting scene, an emotional renunciation.

Stephen smiled. Looking back at the transition, the change of scene came ridiculously sharp. What fate had brought him Denise, the friend of Laura? And how she changed the scene for him! London, the sick excitement of saxophones, the emergence of the individual dæmon, the need for power again. The last five years were too near to follow.

'I'm in danger of being an idealist if I'm not careful,' he muttered as he brought his mind back to Simon and the necessity of crossing Piccadilly Circus.

Simon had nothing to say. He sat sedately having breakfast in the flat. He watched every movement that Stephen made. It was clear that he was waiting to be told a few things.

'I'm not going to tell you much about Mr. Pardon, Simon. So far as Steadley is concerned, I want nothing to be known. He is a business man, an unexciting personality occupying this flat and these clothes. The reasons for his doing so are unimportant; you would be bored by them if I told you. I am taking you into my confidence to this extent because I like you—you talked frankly last night. Aunt Tilly is the only other person who knows Mr. Pardon, and I got in touch with her only yesterday. She must have forgotten the name already, because she rang me up as Jettson.'

'I don't think you'll need to explain anything at Steadley. They'll be pleased to see you.'

'What do they expect?'

'A handsome prodigal.'

For some foolish reason these words made Stephen blush. They were unexpected: and he could not tell if they were intended as a sneer or as a compliment.

Such was the measure of Stephen's discontent. He could never tell his own security. He demanded absolute proof that

laughter was laughter, and not derision. His poised eagle features would double their sharpness, his inquisitive nostrils would interrogate the speaker. He was tall and well-proportioned, yet his body, even in repose, never ceased to be alert. Simon was a little afraid of him. The blush was unnoticed. Only the experienced eyes filled him with wonder.

It would be possible to carry on with trivialities.

'Mother will bring out the best dinner things—illness or no.'

'Is old Tandy alive?'

'Yes, still in the harness room.'

They slid out of London, Stephen driving at a great pace. From time to time he glanced sideways at Simon's features, so young, so resolute. One of the Rhythm Boys. He would alter that. What the boy needed was opportunity, a chance to express himself, to express that great energy.

'Why are you working in that lousy job?'

'Best I can get.' Ashamed of it, too, by the sound of it.

'You must let me give you a hand.'

'Thank you, Stephen. I've got to make my own way.'

As the car roared into Steadley, the brothers mentioned their father for the first time. Both were embarrassed.

'I think I ought to have told you, Stephen. The old man's changed a lot these last few months. He's very ill, you know.'

'I gathered that from the S O S being sent.' He would alter this boy. Already he began to understand him. The boy was no fool. He knew a little of the world. He had enjoyed himself, too; that was obvious from his balance and self-confidence. He was contented, but much too intelligent to be self-satisfied.

'I shall go in first and tell them that you are here, Stephen. Otherwise there will be a kind of orgy. . . .'

An orgy! His homecoming.

It was characteristic of Steadley that it was called the front room, because it was at the back of the house, close to the

scullery door, facing down the rickyard. For two or three hundred years, though, Jettson people had been accustomed to go out that way in the morning to the business of the day. On that side lay the vital interests of the old house. The lawns, the flower-beds, and the carriage sweep were in this term dismissed as adornments. Nobody dared to question the title of the front room.

Stephen sniffed the leathery smell as he went in, and was startled that it held such strong associations. 'I've come back,' he said in a voice unrecognizable as his own.

Margery raised the old man on the pillows. Then she too faced Stephen. He saw her golden dusting of freckles and her greenish eyes. He would not be able to say anything until she was out of the room.

'I sent for you, Stephen.' Old Jettson spoke comfortably, glancing round the room.

'I'll be just outside if you want me.' She caught at both of them with her glance as she went out.

Stephen's heart filled with pity as he looked down at the impotence of his father's hands. His great bulk lay inert. He had been a bull of a man: one of sumptuous appetite and royal energy. The body lying between the sheets had lost all virtue: its disability waited upon death.

'I sent for you, Stephen, my boy, to have a look at you. I'm glad you came. I don't want to go back on our differences, because I've not sent for you to forgive you. You went your own way, and good luck to you. It doesn't make you any more right or me wrong.'

Stephen swallowed the lump in his throat. He went close to the bed and took his father's hand. 'I came back to pay my respects. I don't belong here. I don't wish to belong here. I am glad that we still understand one another.'

Old Jettson looked him over as he would have quizzed a horse. He smiled. 'You've kept yourself well.'

Stephen swung round in response, without shame, showing himself. 'Fairly sound still,' he replied. 'But the others . . . Mother . . . William . . . how are they?' He was at a loss.

'Sorry for themselves, expecting me to die any day now, and being rather put out when I don't.' Old Jettson looked out of the window. He seemed to see right through the rick-yard to the woods. 'Partridge should be pretty fair,' he said. 'I daresay you can still use a gun?'

'Yes.' He tried to suppress a nip of joy. To shoot the Steadley Woods again! 'I can use a gun still.'

'I shan't die for a few days.' His voice had not lost its stridency. 'I shall be glad if you can stop. There are one or two things I should like to talk about. But not all at once—not now.' He pressed his bell.

'I'll stay for a few days, then.'

'You must meet Margery. This is Stephen—Margery.' They shook hands. This time she lowered her eyes.

'You two will be friends,' said old Jettson unexpectedly.

'I hope so.' It was curious, being made to feel clumsy, in front of a woman. His ease fell away in the familiar room.

'I expect Mr. Jettson will be feeling a little tired now. He ought to get some sleep,' she said in her nurse's voice, dismissing him.

The family was waiting in the drawing-room. They were very conscious of themselves as a family.

'I never believed that this would really happen,' said Fanny. 'Stephen, my dear, you might have been dead, or missing or in prison.' She hugged him, and her lavender scent completed her kiss.

'We're all very delighted,' said William, shaking hands as if he were giving prizes. 'I'm glad we were able to find you.' The speech was absurd. They all knew it, and were sorry for William for having to make it.

Stephen put him at his ease. Both hands on his shoulders,

he looked him up and down, the well-worn tweeds, the yellow waistcoat, the slight portliness. 'A sort of prize Jettson,' he said. 'Full weight of all the virtues.' Simon caught his eye and winked at this, and Fanny indulged in a few tears. Then she said:

'I do hope somebody's put a bottle in your bed, Stevie dear. Everybody's scatterbrained now, with illness in the house.' She edged out of the room.

'The prodigal's going to stay a few nights, William. Don't put yourself out, there's a good chap. And if you're not busy now, I'd like to stroll round the Home meadows with a gun. You're going to work, Simon?'

'Yes, work.' He made a wry face. How he despises it all, thought Stephen.

He and William went out across the rickyard.

They had disposed of commonplaces by the time they reached the Home meadows. William asked no questions: Stephen volunteered nothing.

Truth to tell, William was not curious. Since the War, he had regarded himself as separate from ambition. To his mind, ambition characterized all the actions and intentions of those men of his own age who had 'got on,' either socially, financially, or politically. They had undertaken impossibilities, had suffered change, had taken risks, all in order to improve their status. Their existence was a continual strife. Their ambition engrossed them. He had never felt ambition.

He had felt the lack of it at one time, and he had made himself aware all the more of the obsession of other men. He had examined and re-examined himself. At first it had seemed as bad as being a coward: then he shrugged his shoulders and allowed his natural indolence to assert itself. He had done his bit in the War. What need was there now to treat Steadley as a base for ambition, for new actions which would establish him, say as a man of his generation.

No: he had been content to follow the natural developments of Steadley life. For fifteen years he had worn tweeds, enjoyed a couple of rounds of golf on Mondays and played the life of a country gentleman. A few responsibilities had arisen: his seat on the Council; his little bit of money, left by Aunt Prue, because she admired his temperate qualities; his interest in local building developments; and, dominating all these things, of course, the project of the new road. This was the first active measure with which he had been associated. He often worried because it was to be at variance with the opinions of the family; but opposition made him stubborn.

Having Stephen home paralysed him. He resented the intrusion, for one thing: every nerve in his body was burdened with his resentment. He was capable of suffering in that way, till his whole body and mind ached for a chance to vent his suffering. His existence at Steadley was built on a recurrence of negatives, of habits which had arisen in response to circumstances. He had been content with his habits: they were the only possible formula for life. Stephen's presence, even for one day, would destroy his formula; and if Stephen, the elder brother, cared to exert himself to make his presence felt, then there was nothing for it but trouble. His courage and his obstinacy would declare themselves. In the meantime there was no harm in feeling his way as to Stephen's concern with Steadley. He would not ask questions; there was nothing definite he needed to know.

They stood still, as soon as they reached the first copse. The dogs raced in and began hunting, and Stephen held his gun nervously.

'Game's not as good as it was,' said William. 'There are too many houses about. Too much disturbance at week-ends in the Home meadows.'

'I suppose so.' Stephen's polite indifference was not

calculated. He was absorbed in watching the dogs. That absorption had already carried his thoughts beyond, into an interior speculation from which William and even the waiting copse were necessarily excluded. For he stood there in the character of his own boyhood. He heard the chink of some half a dozen leaves falling among the branches: he smelt the rank autumn, and his heart beat again with that expanse of rhythm, that royal rhythm which seemed to claim for its owner some destiny of power, some tangible success, some spiritual enthronement in the future years. He was Simon's age. He had Simon's ambitions. At this moment Simon should be living like this, absorbed in these visionary enterprises. A fine superiority was moulded by the consciousness of these woods at Steadley. He identified himself with the nobility of the line of upstanding oak trees which reared in the mist a profound pattern of winter. Simon should be like this. Even if he, Stephen, individualist, adventurer, idealist, had failed. . . . There was still Simon, a boy, aware of himself, fearless, independent: those penetrating eyes, that imperative mask of a face.

He was showing a great misunderstanding of his young brother's character in this; for, in all his twenty-two years at Steadley, Simon had never become absorbed in a specific ambition nor had he identified any characteristic of life with the nobility of autumnal trees.

In the course of his abstraction, moreover, William had been addressed three times with the same indifference.

'It's a fine open sweep of country, William. Nothing will ever change it.'

'As a matter of fact, there's the new road coming through just about where we're standing.' William allowed a sneer to enter his voice. The man had such damned impudence to come back to Steadley both with the patronage of a tourist and the ease of a possessor. Best let him see straight away

that Steadley would develop like everywhere else, and by whose enterprise it would be developed.

'Oh, the new road.'

'Yes, the old man is opposed to it, of course. Dead against it. But you can see for yourself that it's going to enhance the value of the property. It's only common sense, of course; and I've given it my support from the beginning. After all, the old man won't . . . you know what I mean.'

'Oh, yes, William. I'm sure you're very prudent. And you're bound to succeed. You have the advantage of a whole generation.'

William winced. 'It's only common sense, anyway,' he said.

'Yes, common sense.'

They turned back towards the house. As they came into the rickyard they could see a light in the front room. William thought of Margery in there, quietly tending the old man. It comforted him to know that she was there: he had succeeded in impressing her. She was beautiful, moreover, in that mature harmony of beauty which made his own mature nature breathless with anticipation.

'So you're quite satisfied about the new road?' said Stephen suddenly as they were shutting the gate.

'Yes. Why?' This unknown Stephen was materializing as a threat, an incomprehensible factor. Already the old man may have talked to him.

'I only wondered. It seems a pity. . . .'

'Look here, Stephen.' They stood still. It had to come. They both recognized it. 'Have you come back here to interfere?'

'No . . . I'm not interested. I merely answered an S O S.'

'Let me tell you this.' William's words were slow, cold as driven nails. 'I won't have interference now. You've been away too long. You've made your own life. Steadley meant

nothing to you. The family meant nothing. It has been my life; and you must expect to be treated as a stranger.'

'My dear William, I am a stranger. But you must admit, after being sent for after all these years, naturally one is interested in what one sees. Simon, for instance.'

'He doesn't count, anyway. He'll grow up one day, and then he'll be worth talking about.'

'What exactly do you mean, then, by interference?' Stephen's voice was clear and authoritative. John Mercury had been accustomed to abject obedience.

'Oh, for God's sake don't argue, man. You must know what I mean.' William began to walk in towards the house. He was glad to have spoken to Stephen by himself so soon, and glad to have established himself so easily. It was odd that the first thought which came into his head was that he had defended Margery, too.

Poor old William, thought Stephen, I'm spoiling everything, I suppose; and rather than do that maliciously I'd clear out. But the old man has something on his mind; and I wouldn't wonder if it was about the new road.

In the evening, after dinner, there was little to do but be polite to the family. He asked his mother questions about Simon, and he found himself looking forward to the boy's reappearance from work.

Fanny had aired his old bedroom; but it smelt musty and a little damp. He saw the red curtains and the dark mahogany furniture, the oval mirror in the wardrobe and the blue eiderdown. In a glance he possessed them again, and, to his surprise, he found himself moving the bedside table, which was always left too far away for the reading-lamp.

From the moment Simon and the S O S appeared, he had been acting on his instincts. He had not thought out his

course: he had been inspired. Now that he was alone, in his old room, he must think clearly, he must be honest. He was sick of Mr. Pardon: he was sick of the whole racket. It was like dining sumptuously every night in a room made of cardboard. Every idea, every decision was transitory, but the game had been fun, and dangerous at times. Laura, that flashy genius who loved him, would implore him not to quit. But what matter, if he left it now, never went back? It was not the moral aspect of his business which repulsed Stephen. He enjoyed its beastliness, its career of vice, and its destructiveness. It was the spectacle of Steadley, and his father, which left no doubt in his mind that it was impermanence which was defeating him. Looking first into the eyes of Simon, his younger brother, he had looked back on the last twenty years as twenty years passed, meaningless, passionless, and already remote as childhood. He had intended in that time to marshal the forces of his character . . . yes, and what else? He had expected to love grandly. At first he had sought openly, then apologetically and finally with a carking random thirst. Stephen had never loved a woman for more than a day and a night.

In his small schoolboy bed he shivered. He was in possession of health, character, vitality, all the powers of flesh and mind, but twenty years had passed, and his heart lay timid in its virgin spell.

Two o'clock struck. How long would it be before Simon came home? He calculated the closing time at the 'Earthworks'; and an hour and a half drive to Steadley.

Simon would be tired out. The job would kill him. He let his mind dwell again on Simon, as he had looked last night under the green spotlight, and then when he talked wild revolutionary talk and drank brandy after brandy. He would wait for Simon to come in. He would tell him to pack up the job: he would get Baxter to take him in

Majority Pictures. Just the man for Baxter.

He was as cold as stone by quarter to four, when he heard Simon's car in the drive. He had that dazed feeling of having been awake for hours, yet being unable to account for a single thought that had entered his head. He began to shiver as he put on his dressing-gown. He would go down to the dining-room and get a drink. He would run into Simon then quite naturally as he came out. He'd tell him about the job, letting him see that he was a man of his word. Then he remembered the invalid. It would not do to talk too much near the front room.

With a stealth once famous in the character of John Mercury, he found the back stairs. As he reached the bottom he heard light footsteps running through from the kitchen towards the front room. It was Margery. He drew back and saw her pass in her white overall, as swift and as unconcerned as though it were noon. He wouldn't let her see him. It was absurd, creeping down the back stairs for a drink. In another moment he was in the dining-room, ready for the sound of Simon's key in the front door.

When it turned, however, the door of the front room opened also and Margery tip-toed down the passage. Stephen waited, drink in hand. It would be a little embarrassing to follow her into the hall. She would go back to the sick-room in a minute.

'Simon!' Her deep voice carried.

'Margery, you! Oh, my dear.' .

'I heard your car—I was with your father, and I—thought I'd let you in.'

'You were so sweet on the telephone last night. . . .'

'Oh! Simon.'

Stephen retreated; but there was no other way out of the dining-room. As he came into the passage noiselessly, he saw them in the dim light of the hall, Simon's two dark

arms across her white overall. On the stairs he waited. They were a long time in each other's arms.

He crept back to his room. He shivered now with anger. Why should they choose that moment for their love scene, the moment which he himself had chosen to intervene dramatically in the affairs of Simon?

The old man sent for him again in the morning. Margery came to him while he was having breakfast, and told him. She inquired how he liked sleeping in his old room.

He'd teach her.

'I slept rather badly, as a matter of fact,' he said. 'I woke up several times. I think people spend the night running about here.'

'That's too bad.' She poured herself out a cup of tea, unconcerned.

'I woke up when I heard Simon come in.'

Her hand wavered. If she was going to be any trouble at all, this girl was going to be very tiresome indeed.

'I expect Simon was quite quiet, wasn't he?' she said. 'He usually comes back like a ghost about four o'clock. He sleeps till lunch-time most days. It's a rotten life for him, I think.'

'A rotten life.' He looked her in the eyes. She was calm, untroubled, wary as a cat. She was lovely, certainly; probably about twenty-four, for she had the poise of a woman.

'By the way, we don't mention Simon's work to his father,' she said. 'It's one of the matters which they have decided not to discuss with Mr. Jettson.' She smiled confidentially. Her smile implied that the idea was stupid, or that she considered the confidence rather daring.

'I propose to make use of the prodigal's prerogative and discuss anything I like,' said Stephen rudely.

The old man looked better. He was propped up in the morning sunshine, which gave his skin the texture of old

flannel. He had insisted on his guns remaining in the room, and Stephen was astonished to see a fairly new twelve-bore laid across his knees.

'You only had a couple of shots, yesterday, in the Home meadows,' he said.

So he had listened! Lying there in the misty afternoon, he had waited to hear how they shot!

'I'm afraid that was all. And one of those was a hare. Though, to tell you the truth, Father, I was looking about me too much to be quite on form and we were talking, William and I . . .'

'You remained on speaking terms?'

'Oh, yes. There was plenty to talk about.'

The old man smiled and looked cunning.

'You needn't tell me lies, you know, Stephen. Everybody else does; and I think you might well be given prodigal's privilege.'

His own words taken out of his mouth left him without an answer. His father nodded and continued:

'I want to talk about several things. Don't think I sent for you idly; and don't feel that you need go in for sob stuff. Are you well off?'

'Yes. I'm fairly prosperous. I've never had any financial difficulties.'

'Let me talk to you, then, as a business man—all Jettsons have been dealers, yeomen, except the duds—I'm an old Tory, and I expect you are by now. I'm dying in most difficult circumstances; and I need your help. In saying this I'm climbing down, you see. I had thought that I should do without you.' Again he smiled, showing his broken teeth, as if he were at a horse sale. Old brigand.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'We'll let bygones be bygones, of course. But I don't want people to think that I'm interfering in coming back here.'

'That's what you are going to do—whether William or anybody else likes it or not. I'm worried, Stephen, and I need your help. Not till the beginning of this year did I feel any weakness, in myself, in the place, in the things I believe in. Then I had a stroke after the Richmond Horse Show; and everybody panicked. I used to go to the Show, you remember, with George Avery? Well, George died in the spring and I went alone this year. They thought I'd die before they got me home. Then, as I came round, I felt changed. I knew that I would die—before the year was out. I listened to them talking. I watched their faces, old and young. They have a new expression, a close, grubbing look, like moles. They're frightened in a way I don't understand. They've no more pride nor zest. They look over their shoulders and see acres of creeping little houses. They calculate values at so much a square yard. They slink away shamefacedly to pleasures in the town. I shall never go outside Steadley again, except in a coffin upon one of my own farm wagons. I am ready to die, Stephen.'

He shifted the gun to one side and reached for a glass of water. Stephen rose with a jerk to help him. 'Let me do it, Father.' He was surprised at his voice. He had not spoken to his father like that since he was a little boy. He had ceased to think of him as a sentient, emotional man like himself.

'And give me one of those tablets. They keep me going, unless I have too many, and then Forsett says I'd stop altogether.'

He gave his father a tablet from a box on the mantelpiece.

'Let me go on talking before I'm tired. I want you to understand this. Our family has been here in this house for two hundred years, and in Steadley for God knows how long. I have lived well and I have enjoyed living. I want my family to go on.'

His eyes shone and his fanged teeth bit the words.

'Stephen, I am conscious of my family. I want you to be sure that we are not swallowed up, eaten by new roads, nibbled by new villas, wasted away in little money-grubbing deals . . .'

'I will do my best if I am worthy of doing anything. You see, I hardly belong here now; and William is looking after everything,' said Stephen.

'William has shares in the building development company, and in a garage. Simon is in a jazz band. You—you have been an outsider. I don't know what you've been. I don't want to know.' He lay back, sweat shining on his face. Stephen stood.

'I'll do what I can. Already I've been talking to Simon . . .'

The old man would never see that he was the last person to do these things.

'Can't you see, Stephen? There are no children, no family. Only a road coming through. A by-pass road through *my* Home meadows. . . .'

'I'll do what I can. I understand, Father.' He bowed his head. He had been conscious of Steadley for twenty-four hours. He knew that it belonged to the past. He thought of the pallid autumnal shadows in the Home meadows.

Margery came in. 'I expect you've done enough talking.' She bustled round him; but he gripped the gun in his right hand, trying to lift it.

'For you, Stephen. To shoot the Steadley Woods, my boy,' he said, closing his eyes.

He strolled out into the rickyard with the gun under his arm. He had been insincere; he had tricked even his own feelings. Now he was empty: all that emotional loyalty had swilled out of him.

William closed the doors of the garage, and stood in front of him.

‘Have you managed to cure the invalid, Stephen?’

‘No.’ He was in no mood for heavy banter. ‘He’s given me one of his guns.’

‘He has, has he?’ Stephen recognized the sharpness of the voice. Evidently William had been watching them from the garage.

‘William,’ he said, ‘let me be straight with you. I have no intention whatever of standing in your light. As soon as my use here is finished, I shall be gone. You will be Mr. Jettson of Steadley. I shall be somebody else.’

‘There will be nothing new or remarkable about that.’

‘The old man spoke to me about the new road.’

‘Well?’

‘If I say that it is quite clear that I am going, and therefore that only you are concerned with Steadley: if I make it obvious that my interest here is no longer even a nominal one——’

‘Yes?’ William still smiled.

‘Does it not affect your interest in the road to some extent? It seems to me, you see, that nobody will want to live here and see this so-called development take place on the doorstep.’

‘I don’t see what it has to do with you, Stephen. You have just said . . .’

‘Only this. I am a human being and I am my father’s son.’

‘This is a sudden decision, isn’t it? Why, I don’t suppose you know a thing about the road.’

‘I don’t know about the finance of the road, certainly . . .’

‘You’re only concerned with æsthetics? Or with other people’s views? I suppose such a conception as the greatest good of the greatest number never occurs to people like

yourself, whose interests have never been but for yourself?’

Stephen waited to see if he would continue. He was insecure, arguing about this road which was already the subject of public controversy; but he was conscious of an irresistible desire to have his way. Here was a case, so simple, so moral, an enterprise of exact dimensions. William was self-confident, meticulously prepared; it was the achievement of years of effort. That alone tempted one to pit one's energies, just and yet unprepared, against him.

‘I think you'd better leave local politics to us poor locals, Stephen. It happens that we are fit for self-government.’

He walked away, his broad back solid in the sunlight, his step even, his confidence unshaken. An attractive figure, thought Stephen, so mediocre and so nonchalant. It was curious how this type of Englishman needed the suggestion of a comfortable sum of money to convince his fellow men that he shared the common substance of life.

William tried to shake off his isolation. When they had suggested sending for Stephen, he had said to himself that he would be fair. By nature he was possessive: he needed possessions, and he counted on them for his happiness. He was not without generosity; and it was with conscious generosity that he had schooled himself for Stephen's return. Steadley was now his birthright; and Stephen would come as a stranger.

Now, after twenty-four hours, Stephen was standing between him and his birthright. His mind returned again and again to a subject he had never mentioned, one which they had all regarded as delicate, though in a sense obvious, and that was his father's will.

Would there be a bargain with Stephen over the will? Would Stephen be induced to interest himself in opposing the road, and return to a prodigal's share in the will?

Resentment fell upon William like a shadow. He had never waited for his father to die, but——? He had lived here in Steadley for fifteen years, subservient to family needs. He had sacrificed his freedom, his independence: his sojourn had been made easy. He had been persuaded to use up his life. For what?

Coming along the footpath from the village was Margery. How desirable she was! How candid and quick. He wanted to lie in her arms, to be nursed, to absorb her protective vitality. He would tell her everything about Stephen. He would make her listen. He would compromise her with confidences even to laying a burden upon her. For he himself was shrinking from the responsibility, the ambition he needed to protect his way of life. She was cautious, afraid to give herself away, distrusting her love for Simon. In her mind she was already his mistress, and this licence of the mind's flesh filled her with terror, drove her out into the solitude of the woods.

'So you need cheering up, William? Why?'

'Oh, everything.'

She glanced at him and saw his eagerness, his attention to her every movement. 'You must know Margery,' he said, 'that this is a trying time for me.'

'It is for the whole family. One blessing is that your brother came: it's such a comfort to your father. Dr. Forsett says that already he's changed for the better. Things will follow their natural course. It is only a question of time: he will sink gradually and comfortably. That is more than one would have been able to say two days ago.'

'And I must stand by and watch this performance?'

'Performance?'

'The prodigal's return, Margery. The inevitable return of Stephen to everybody's sympathies, to everybody's affections, to claim his birthright. Don't laugh; I know it sounds like

the Old Testament. It is not only money, it is sympathy, status, or what you will. It is my position, my whole life. I have lived here, making my own life; and he, Stephen, chose to go away, to fend for himself. He had ideas, hopes, not merely to fill his belly; I know Stephen. He was after an adventure, an ideal. I stayed here because I need no adventure to live. That is our difference. I am simple; I need no stimulus. The War, four years of it, left me with only one desire, and that was for peace. Not very constructive, you might say, to settle in the easy ways of a country gentleman; but then you have no knowledge of war and of courage. I should say the lack of courage. For to those like myself . . .'

He gripped her hand. He had never spoken like this to any human being, he had never had such control of his thoughts. He had imagined that he was fond of Margery in the same way that he had desired girls in the past. The fluency and completeness of his statement revealed a new confidence in his feelings, one that astonished him as much as it did her.

She withdrew her hand after a few moments, and modestly blew her nose. She was the kind whose sympathy attracts all men, and whose lack of sentimentalism defeats many. She had observed, as intimately as if she had known him for years, William's obsession with his failure. A false sense of security, a thousand procrastinations, and long days of anxious inactivity were the components of his obsession. He needed no adventure to live. His progress from one day to the next was sufficient adventure. She could never help him. She shrank from the portly, well-favoured body beneath the tweed. It was not only the fastidious selection of a discriminating woman: it was the choice of her own body, still aware of Simon's embrace, already dedicated.

She could have helped him. It would have meant putting both her arms round his neck, cajoling, whispering and

explaining to him there in Steadley Woods. And for that she had no room, her heart was too full.

So she stepped daintily in front of him along the narrow footpath towards the house, his measured footsteps following hers. The trifling failures of twenty years were vented in the hatred she had released.

Stephen watched them cross the lawn and turned away to look at Simon.

'I hoped I should see you last night, but you were very late. You came in about four o'clock, didn't you?'

'Yes. It's a long journey.' Simon blushed, because he thought of Margery, so quiet and loving in his arms. Stephen noticed. He could not leave them alone. He would mention it again and again to both of them, hinting innocently that he might know everything.

'I want to talk about your job, Simon—your impossible job.'

'I'm going to give it up.' There was defiance in his voice.

'You are.' Stephen's voice was final. 'I've fixed an introduction for you with Baxter of Majority Pictures. You are almost certain to find something with him. Besides, he is a personal friend of mine—I mean of Pardon's.'

'A personal friend?' Simon frowned. He had got his job at the 'Earthworks' without influence. He wished to stand on his own feet.

'Look here, Simon, you must understand me. I believe in the sincerity of everything you said about living your life. I know that you are conscious of the decay, and you think that you and your friends will sweeten the earth with blood and fire. You said a great deal more, and I admire you for your conviction. I cannot be on your side, because I am too integral a part of that decay myself. I am sick of ideals, of purges, palliatives, and pick-me-ups. I am rotting in my own

squalor, the squalor I once thought I had fought to destroy. In you, I suppose, there is something different, something fresh that I can't understand. You are my own brother, and I am therefore brought into an intimate relationship with you. But I am also a human being who, knowing you, wishes to know you more. I don't want to deceive you, Simon. I desire your happiness; and you must let me help you. You must accept me.'

He checked himself. Simon was looking at him intently, and tears stood in his eyes. Words flew to his lips—words which would have demolished in an instant that look.

'I have waited, Stephen, for somebody to talk like this. Years ago, you see, you said something similar when I was a kid, bringing your shoes. . . .'

'You remember that? The day I went away? I said more then, I believed more, I hoped more. I had a blank, open world at my feet: the mud of the trenches behind me and the unbelievable complacency of Steadley driving me mad. I was an enlightened man then.'

'Why talk disillusion, Stephen? You are not old.'

'Not old, but used. Empty. One of the Georgian hollow men.' He laughed. The crisis was passed. 'You will soon see through me, Simon, if you get me in a strong enough light.'

'I am grateful to you for arranging about Baxter, but I don't want to go if it is simply an affair of influence.'

'Influence will not come into it. Baxter can find work for as many first-class arrangers as London can send him.' Stephen fidgeted with the curtain, but his voice was peremptory.

That afternoon he went to Steadley village to find out about the road. The plans were not finally approved, but there seemed no doubt that the majority of those in authority were for it coming across the Home meadows. Behind them

stood the Harrison Building Corporation. Messrs. Cohen and Macnaughton had built houses for half the inhabitants of the new Steadley, and by this time they were in a strong position in local politics. The trend of business towards the new estates had embarrassed old-established tradesmen, and several of these, who ran the Council, had found themselves very glad to obtain favourable mortgages from the Corporation. The new road, with its development of virgin property, was to be their most important enterprise. The woods of Steadley were to put on their green and cast their bosky shadows but once more; then the ambitions of these men would be satisfied.

Stephen went into the Steadley Arms and thought about it. In the public bar they were discussing the road: two north-country voices and a Welsh one. Work-people came to Steadley from all parts of England. From backgrounds geographically diverse they brought a uniformity which in itself was as strange to Steadley as a foreign invasion. It was hopeless to fight that uniformity. It was sweeping across southern England. People were falling into an industrial dream. Stephen, individualist, despised the people, not the machines. He despised the instruments, Cohen and Macnaughton; but he knew their game. Simon might denounce them, William might admire their material success, but Stephen stepped across the road into the character of Mr. Pardon and into the Post Office, and telephoned Laura.

It was a little out of Laura's line; but Stephen worked quickly. They had but an hour before the office closed. They were to ring him back within forty minutes. It would be the biggest deal he had done with Laura, and naturally she was worried. But, above all things, she was grateful that he had not quit. She would see it through, would Laura.

He went back to the Post Office in forty minutes.

'They've panicked,' said Laura on the telephone. 'But I've got a price out of them . . .'

'Good girl.'

'Some price, though! I suppose you know what you're up to, Stephen? I've no objection to real estate, but this is going to be a speculation with the lid off. It will be a nice change from the matrimonial, but . . .'

'So long as I know they'll take a price,' said Stephen, 'I can handle them. Trust Stephen Pardon, Laura.'

Yes, Laura would trust Stephen Pardon, even as an army of desperadoes had once trusted John Mercury, and as he himself had once trusted Stephen Jettson. She would trust Mr. Pardon in this, his most daring of speculations.

For he walked into the office of Messrs. Cohen and Mac-naughton, and gave them four hours to consider the most sensational offer of their lives, a bid for the control of the Harrison Building Corporation, no less.

That evening the door of the front room at Steadley was rarely closed. Old Jettson had been overstimulated by events and by a too large dose of his sleeping-tablets. The family went about on tiptoe; and all through dinner they talked in hushed voices.

'I suppose it's for the best,' said Fanny. 'After all the first-born is the first-born, it was bound to upset him; though he might have been much worse if Stephen hadn't come.'

'Seems to me he would have been exactly the same.'

William sat, very upright, at the end of the table. They could leave death-bed arrangements to him with every confidence that everything would be in good taste.

'And he keeps talking about that dreadful road,' Fanny continued. 'It seems to worry him all the time. It was so wrong of William to support it I think.' They looked at

Stephen, for they knew, in their bones, what the old man had hoped of Stephen.

'William's a grown man. He's a right to his opinion.'

'Thank you, Stephen.' William could not conceal his sneer.

'But if he takes it upon himself to accelerate events,' Stephen's voice hardened, took on the ringing quality of the voice of John Mercury, 'he will never realize this one ambition he has had. . . .'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, William, not so loud, dear. It's so wrong of you both to start this. I wish I'd never mentioned the road. It's been fated, all along.'

'What do you mean, Stephen?'

'I mean that it never pays to take short cuts, William, to anticipate the design of Fate. Three of us have come out of Steadley, out of a régime, a way of life, a part of history, if you like. We have wanted, each in his own way, to mould events, to cause life to happen rather than to be a victim of events. That was to be our struggle as a class: it was all that stood between us and decay. The old man knows it in his bones. I saw it; and decided to choose my own struggle myself; Simon is more aware of it than any of us; and you, William, are panic-stricken with what you have seen; so panic-stricken that you, the cautious one, are now taking risks.'

Fanny half rose, her handkerchief to her eyes, but Stephen's slow speech and insolent commanding eye held her.

'Don't go, Mother, this household exists on half-truths.'

'But not until you came, Stephen, has it sunk to accusations and threats.' William's voice grew loud again. He had stopped eating, his assurance gone, his gentlemanly self-confidence ebbing away. Now or never he must face Stephen. He was being cornered by the cunning of his father in making this last move. Very soon he would be alone, the head of his house and the owner of Steadley. The Harrison Building

Corporation would wait upon him with their offer for the development of the frontages to the new road. He would have his way. Steadley would change, and his cause, his own ambition, would be won. A very short time now; and no hesitation or compromise with Stephen, would see him through. If only the old man . . .

'I think, Mother, that you had better go back to the sick-room,' he said. 'Stephen and I must discuss one or two things.'

Stephen rose and held the door for her.

'I am glad you want to talk, William. I had almost forgotten the Steadley jargon of half-truths.'

'You'd better go.' William now stood up to him. 'You've quit once and you're not wanted back. Steadley can do without you and you can do without Steadley. You want to interfere. *He* wants you to interfere. You've come back with a lot of sentimental drivel and listened to the talk of reactionaries. You want to stop the road. You won't. It's got to happen: it is part of the normal development of the country. Go back to your own life, whatever it is, and mind your own business. It will take more than you to stop that road.'

The door behind him opened. Margery stood there, and the fury dried on William's lips.

'He wants to see . . .' She paused suddenly, aware of the meaning of what she was saying. 'He wants to see—Stephen; and I think Simon had better be called too.'

So this was the end. William shivered, for his rage trembled in his body unspent. 'Simon left a telephone number: I'll send the message,' he said, glad of the little job.

'Better let me. He'll want to see you next.'

Next. After the first-born. William shrugged his broad shoulders and gave her the number.

'Margery, you didn't mind my talking to you this morning? You see, I want you to understand me.'

'I understand you perfectly.' Her strong hands kept him at a distance. 'You will have all you want without me. I am not a possession.'

In whispers, Stephen, kneeling by the bed in the front room, comforted the last minutes of old Jettson's life.

'I shall do it because you asked me, and I couldn't refuse. It's not for my benefit, and it won't be for yours. . . .'

Old Jettson nodded and waved him back. They would part on those terms, agreeing to differ. That was honest; he was ready to die, trusting an enemy, rather than measuring the distrust of the others.

In the morning the front room became very quiet; and William went in. It was the end. Everywhere in the house people moved methodically as if their parts had been rehearsed. When Simon came they told him that he was too late; and he took off his hat, standing in the drive, conscious of his part in the ceremony and waiting for his cue. A maid pulled down the pale blinds with their Edwardian lace fringes. Fanny locked herself in her bedroom and tried on the black dresses she had ready in the wardrobe. Time stopped at Steadley: the past began.

William, ennobled by bereavement and dignified by the necessity for making arrangements, was at his ease, but strangely out of place. Simon took in the whole character of death; but his eyes sought Margery: now he was resolute. If there was a new life, it was never now: it was constructed in faith, not in time. Stephen watched him and then briefly excused himself to go into Steadley.

He was received by Messrs. Cohen and Macnaughton as if he was God. Each of these gentlemen had received a small fortune in cash from Mr. Pardon, and they now regarded his person as sacred. They had agreed to stay on as managers; they were entirely at his disposal.

'We have heard that old Jettson is dead,' they said. 'And

with your permission we think we should get on to the son at once about the Steadley development.'

'I shall deal with that, now,' said Stephen. 'And this is what you can say to Mr. William Jettson.'

Walking back, he found Simon and asked him to stroll around the Home meadows. The autumn was bright there, untouched by the blight upon the house.

'We shall lose this,' said Simon. 'It will now go to make William and a dozen others rich. I shall miss its beauty, but it will be good riddance to it, all the same. It is an anachronism, a decay, an autumn in itself.' He was flushed with the boisterous day; he was trying to walk quicker.

'Suppose you inherit it?'

'I shan't. Why worry?'

'What would you do with it?'

'I'd clear out. I'd go—like you.'

'So you'd run away?' He held Simon's arm very tight, and he wished he could feel the issue going into Simon's body.

'Steadley belongs to the past,' said Simon, young, headstrong, adamant of heart. 'The past began to-day. I've work elsewhere. I shall go away and forget it.'

'You mean politics?'

'Yes. You can belittle it and call it politics. Or you can simply call it living. I told you my beliefs, Stephen. You think I'm young, crazy, idealistic. You said so. You said you were disillusioned; but remember, you once rebelled and cut clean away from—all this; and you yourself were one of my illusions. Now, it's dead. I leave it, and——'

'Leave me with it?' Stephen let go of him, the unresisting, adamant body.

'You?' Simon seemed to consider him for the first time. 'I don't know where you belong, Stephen; but you've got me my new job and I hope we shall still know each other.'

They turned then, the boisterous wind with them, and for the last time enjoyed the privacy of the Home meadows and the view of the house above the rickyard. Simon began to hurry again, because he must see Margery to discuss her plans; and Stephen felt the happiness flow out of him and the power of his energy slacken. He fought back his hatred of the lovers because they were lovers. He neared the end of his cycle—a cycle he began to recognize and despise.

‘What about the road now, William?’ he said.

‘I shall manage, but it won’t come through Steadley. . . .’

‘But Cohen and Macnaughton?’

‘What do you know about them?’

‘Oh! Local gossip. They’re behind the development, aren’t they?’

William, generous now with his authority, smiled.

‘They’re being run by a public benefactor, it seems. Steadley will be sold on condition that the road skirts it to the north and the Home meadows are handed by them to the Council as an open space. I am to remain here. It’s a queer business, but the price is quite absurdly philanthropic; and there will be no difficulty whatever about the Council agreeing.’

‘And what will your job be?’

‘I shall—well—just live. . . .’

‘As a public monument, eh? A public Jettson, unlovely relic of competence, meanness, courage, arrogance, and self-seeking. Steadley has soaked up blood and marrow long enough. The decay is complete, completed by death and worse than death, a mortifying life. Now it passes to new owners, leaving no heirs.’

But William, his mind still upon the amazing bid, smiled even more blandly.

‘Stephen, old chap, I’m not much of a talker; but I’m glad I never had to fall out with you over the arrangements. I’m sorry if I . . .’

'The only thing I need repeat, William, is my advice against short cuts. It is the only time a fool or a frightened man becomes dangerous. Over-stimulating the old man's heart was a sorry substitute for talk. Dosing the milk for his tea with sleeping draught was a criminal short cut. I shall overlook it because you are best employed living on here as a public monument in a public park. I once ran away from everything you represent. Perhaps Simon will be luckier. . . .'

There he sighed and left William, for fools and frightened men are dangerous; and William's fears grew up in his heart like the first winds of winter, rattling the windows of the front room, and lightly fingering the white sheet which covered old Jettson.

A Christmas Tale

THE LION walked through the cold fields all tussocky with frozen mangolds.

He disliked the World War because of the lack of circuses and stale bread (which he favoured soaked in rich gravy). Stale bread was now being saved for swill, and circus business was killed by the black-out. So it was difficult for Smith (that was the lion's name) to practise as a national emblem; and he was driven mad by his conscience because he was not 'doing his bit.'

It was therefore with a noble melancholy that he traversed the crisp uncomfortable field and padded through the hedge into Lark Lane. Miss Fond, on her bicycle, nearly collided with him.

'Help! help! Tigers!' she cried as she dismounted.

'Pardon me, madam, you exaggerate. A *lion*!'

'Lions! Oh help!'

'One lion, madam, at your service,' said Smith; and as an afterthought to put her more at her ease, added, 'and the compliments of the season to you, m'am. These are hard times; but Christmas comes but once a year and. . .'

Miss Fond sniffed 'I don't believe it. I must have had an accident.'

'I must say I thought you braked rather hard.'

'I don't believe it,' repeated Miss Fond. 'I'm sure I have eaten nothing, nor . . .'

'Nor have I,' said Smith; and his eye, chancing to catch

hers at that moment, set her off again crying 'Help! help!' and making passes behind her bicycle.

'I am hoping to come across a Christmas dinner,' Smith said simply.

Miss Fond, with weak, ungainly haste, leapt back into her saddle and began pedalling like mad. 'I still don't believe it,' she grunted. 'Not a lion! I wonder if I am dead?'

Trotting alongside, Smith remarked: 'You seem very sprightly to me; though, if you swerve about on these frosty roads . . .'

'I don't'—snapped Miss Fond—'as a rule.'

'I know someone who snapped,' growled the lion rather irritably, 'and swallowed more than she meant to.' Miss Fond looked sideways at his noble jaws and pedalled herself almost to death. 'Alive or dead, I shall soon be at the lodge gates,' she panted.

'A lodge, eh!' said Smith. 'With a fine mansion in a park? Nothing would suit me better this Christmas. A place where there is still dignity and repose!'

He frisked with eager anticipation about the speedy but reluctant figure upon the bicycle, causing her to ring her bell ceaselessly to express her alarm.

'You will only make an ass of yourself if you keep doing that,' Smith warned her, as they came to the last lap within sight of the gates. 'And I do not consider it very complimentary to me.'

'His Lordship will pay you all the compliments you deserve,' said Miss Fond, through her teeth, and encouraged no doubt by the nearness of home.

'And who, may I ask, is his Lordship?'

'Lord Trellis, of course. . . .' But Miss Fond now observed that the gates were shut. To dismount in the presence of a lion was out of the question. To show alarm by circling outside and crying out was to invite ridicule. Her position as

housekeeper at Trellis Hall demanded dignity and an unabated imperiousness.

'That would be Trellis, the big game hunter?'

But Miss Fond saved her breath for a new outcry. 'Gate! gate!' she cried. 'Open the gates at once.'

Mrs. Pleag, her tried enemy these many years, waddled with provocative leisureliness from her lodge.

'Who said *gate*?' said she, knowing very well.

Miss Fond, in a sweat of helpless bitterness, was forced to circle once. 'Don't argue, Mrs. Pleag, in the name of God.'

Mrs. Pleag stood squarely before the bars like an old-fashioned regiment of the line preparing against an assault.

'I would have you know, *Mrs. Housekeeper Fond* . . .' she began, 'that flunkys, like yourself, there may be up at the Hall. . . .'

No more words came from her wide-opened mouth, for it was less than a yard away from that of the lion. She threw her whole bulk against the gate, and her enemy, Miss Fond, plush-faced, with embarrassed energy, swung through, the lion trotting beside.

Lacking imagination as she did, Mrs. Pleag decided afterwards, over a strong cup of tea, that the whole thing had been a trick of the light, and that she would say nothing about it to her husband, who, being gamekeeper, would know of any lions—if there were any.

I do not know whether the lion or Miss Fond was the more embarrassed as they approached Trellis Hall.

'A dearth of bread and circuses can lead one into curiously undignified situations,' said Smith, by way of making conversation. 'But no doubt his Lordship is accustomed to keeping a good old-fashioned open house at Christmas.'

'Not with rationing,' answered the housekeeper, with automatic and sour authority.

'Oh! rationing hardly worries me at all,' murmured Smith,

noting with some pleasure the alarm this caused to the bicyclist.

Lord Trellis then observed them with his binoculars from the terrace; and he slapped his great haunches and laughed, and cried, 'Serve her right, the sour old puss; serve her right.'

He was armed only with a 410, which he used for odd potting from the house; and he decided to hold his fire in order to enjoy the pursuit of his housekeeper by the lion, which was a rare novelty, most welcome in the festive season.

'Your Lordship! Your Lordship!'

'What is it, Miss Fond?'

'It's a terrible lion, which has been following me for miles. It keeps snapping, and I'm sure it would have eaten me if I hadn't warded it off. Please shoot it, my lord, before I get off this bicycle. I have already been through so much.'

Lord Trellis stroked his great fibrous whiskers, and mourned the fact that the 410 would not be very effective against the tawny bulk of Smith.

Miss Fond never ceased complaining as she circled in the drive; nor did she mention any part of the conversation she had had with the lion.

Lord Trellis, kept very short by her mean housekeeping, suffering from loneliness because he was such a bore about killing big game, and feeling very obsolete in the midst of a World War designed to kill people, if possible as sitting targets, caught the lion's eye, as he rose to hasten to the gun-room.

Smith winked.

Lord Trellis winked back; and seeing that he hesitated about going to the gun-room, Smith remarked: 'The compliments of the season, Lord Trellis. I know I'm intruding, but . . .'

'Don't believe him, my lord,' shrilled Miss Fond. 'It isn't true. Lions don't talk.'

'They get very hungry, though, after running along cold country roads,' said Smith, giving her a look full of meaning.

This made poor Miss Fond circulate all the faster and Lord Trellis to sizzle and boom with laughter.

'Compliments of the season to you, my dear fellow. Come inside and . . .'

'Lord Trellis. I beg you! In fact, I warn you! If that lion enters Trellis Hall, I shall give notice. For years and years I've worked . . .'

But Lord Trellis bellowed and smote himself and boomed back at her. 'Be so good as to ride round to the back door and leave the lion to me.'

'A very good suggestion, if I may say so, my lord,' said Smith. 'As a National Emblem I had hoped to be asked everywhere this Christmas, but I find myself quite on my own resources and. . . '

'Come inside. Come inside. There's the gun-room; there's all my trophies. . . '

That began a very strange Christmas at Trellis Hall.

Miss Fond, who had no intention of leaving whenever she gave notice, because it was much more spiteful to stay on, dismounted her bicycle at the back door, and pranced vengefully into the house.

'His Lordship has got a lion in with him,' she barked at Mr. Cod, the butler.

Mr. Cod's eyebrows went up and he smiled indulgently, for he had always nursed a suspicion that Miss Fond took a glass of something very strong on the quiet; and he would not, it must be admitted, have been averse to joining her.

'And the cow jumped over the moon,' he said. 'His Lordship has just ordered tea and bread and butter for six; and he says, to ask you where is the usual Christmas cake.'

Now Lord Trellis rarely enjoyed himself, Miss Fond saw to that. He revelled in the company of Smith.

They had tea for six. They took down all the dusty trophies. They recalled native war songs and dances. They imitated the cries of animals. They fired shot after shot from the gun-room and lavatory windows. They ate enormously, and fetched up the best port. They made Cod think he was back in the Navy, sent him hollering *avast*, swearing, and skidding in a wild hornpipe throughout the house.

The presence of the lion filled Lord Trellis with defiance. He stamped his feet at Miss Fond and fired revolver shots over her head.

But the presence of the lion—and the looks he gave her—terrified her most.

Never being one who could let well alone, she telephoned the police and said: 'This is the housekeeper at Trellis Hall. His Lordship is with a lion in the dining-room.'

'You mean he is injured?'

'No, he is just talking.'

'*Talking!*' Rich marrowfat police laughter.

She telephoned Dr. Luff, and the Clerk to the Rural District Council. Neither of them cared for Miss Fond in any case; and, being convivial, they just laughed. On Christmas afternoon, she cycled down to the lodge, and that was her last extremity.

'Now Mrs. Pleag, you saw me with a lion when I came back on my bicycle.'

Mrs. Pleag glanced at her husband, saw him tap his temple and then she said: 'A lion, Miss Fond! Whatever next!'

Miss Fond, bleached with fury, cycled away, and made arrangements for Christmas dinner for eight with exceptional quantities of stale bread.

Smith complimented her upon it. Lord Trellis, who had told him every big game story he knew, said it did her credit and that he would take her on his next safari. Cod sang a

song called 'Every Nice Girl Loves a Sailor,' and offered her his hand in marriage.

To everyone's surprise, she accepted this; and it therefore fell to Cod's lot to explain to the police, Dr. Luff, the Clerk to the Rural District Council, and the Pleags what she had been driving at, which was an almost impossible task, as Smith had gone back to work early next morning.

And lions look so much alike that it is impossible, too, to trace him and get his confirmation of these events—even if he is willing to give it.

Edna's Fruit Hat

‘WHAT A relief for Edna,’ they said. ‘But she won’t know herself. She’s always been so devoted to Mother. She must feel that she’s starting life again—and at her age!’

‘But we’ve all done our best for Mother, come to that.’

They arrived, the relatives; their mourning, smelling of moth-balls from its long preparedness; their black, glossy in the sun; their voices satisfactory as the steady afternoon.

Edna, glancing over her shoulder to make sure all the blinds were down, advanced across the weedy drive. Everyone had known that this would happen: everyone had been prepared. Edna’s sad demeanour was so rehearsed that she could hardly believe that the day was the great day, Mother a handsome corpse in the chintz bedroom, and the house filled with the decent inactivity of death. Edna had been prepared for over ten years: that was why they said that it was a relief.

There was not much money involved. There were the railway shares: but the last ten years had made inroads upon capital and everyone agreed that there could not be much left.

There was some property: but it was indifferent stuff, a source of continual worry, a declining asset. Working-class property is not what it was. It needs money spent on it, now and then, if it is old: and people on the dole are such bad payers.

Hardly a year passed without Mother having a notice served on her to carry out some repair to keep the place

habitable: and yet the tenants would complain about bugs and high rents, leaving Mother with such an irregular income that Edna had had to manage with one maid in spite of all the stairs.

Edna rubbed her thin hands, welcoming the relatives. It was a pity there were so many, as the small amount of money was to be divided amongst all of them. The property, however, she had always understood would be hers—the reward of her companionship of Mother. All the even numbers from twenty-eight to sixty-eight of Prospect Place, were her reward.

‘She must feel she’s starting life again,’ they said.

They crowded round the tea-table, bringing black into the red dining-room, where Mother had enjoyed her roast beef and heavy jokes. Their eyes valued the silver teapot, the spoons, the cutlery and the best tea service. It was a good tea; and, after all, starvation was no part of mourning for the dead. Comfort was to be found in food, even as consolation in heirlooms.

‘Well, Edna, I suppose you’ll have a sale—of the odd stuff that’s not wanted.’

‘Yes; a sale would be best.’ She spoke flatly, not betraying the tremor she felt at the thought of the sale. To be able to sell off the birdcages, the croquet sets, the mementoes of Burma, the basket-work furniture, the useless kitchen utensils, was a cherished dream.

The huge array of neatly arranged junk in the upper rooms had tormented her these twenty years.

She had suggested selling some of it once in a sweaty revolt of spring-cleaning, but Mother promptly had had one of her attacks and begged her never to mention it again.

The suggestion of a sale, decorously made in the shaded dining-room, sent a shock of joy through her; and it took her

lifetime's experience of self-control to prevent her hand trembling with the plate of thin bread and butter.

'Poor Edna. You will have to be brave; it is not going to be easy.' A sticky warm hand closed on hers.

'I shall manage.'

'Oh! but we'll all help. We can't leave you to manage all this by yourself.'

'Besides, Edna, there's the house. Much too big; but dear Mother always clung to it because it was Father's. We shall have to make arrangements to sell the house, Edna.'

'I suppose we shall.' She rose, unable to sit there at the head of the table, concealing from them her emotions. Her voice was unsteady, the lines round her mouth wavered. She left them, gliding into the yellow sunlight of the hall.

'We shall have to keep an eye on Edna. She knows nothing of life; and the strain is telling on her.'

'She's sure to do something mad in her grief. . . .'

'But I suppose she is provided for?'

'Well provided for. She will be able to settle down quietly in a small room somewhere.'

'Silly of her to take on about the house.'

'Absurd. It's clear we shall have to stay on and see this through, to protect our own interests, if nothing else.'

Complacent with scones and home-made strawberry jam, with the feeling that they were doing the right thing, and with the prospect of something for nothing when the estate was wound up, they were charitable about Edna, because she had given her life for Mother, and Mother was a 15-stone corpse upstairs. Very soon the talk drifted to the money and the possessions. While they chatted sombrely they fixed their eyes upon the silver teapot which Edna had hurriedly put down.

Edna leant against the lincrusta in the bright hall and the

sun lighted upon her bones. Unheard, laughter shook her until she was weak at the knees. Selling the tall angular house, with its chocolate paint and its dim meaningless corners, was no new idea to her. More than once she had caught herself looking wistfully at estate agents' boards offering the unlovely husks of other respectable houses.

Now it was about to happen. Would she be able to fold her hands, so used to tending its ungainly interior, and watch them dispose of the house, without the relief of giddy applauding laughter? Would she contain herself, with joy like the summer warmth upon her bones?

She listened to the voices in the dining-room and composed herself. It was her moment of liberation, but control was still essential.

'There, there, Edna,' they said. 'We've decided everything for you. Cousin Sid will have everything valued.'

'Everything valued?'

'Yes; the goods and chattels that we don't want.'

Goods and chattels, that was good. Wearily she looked at them and wondered at their furtive eyes coveting the valuables.

Her own treasure, which she had inherited, winked and glowed inside her like something living, whiter than silver, ruddier than gold. It mocked their anxiety and made her lower her eyes. It was best not to say much, but to sit there folding one's hands, waiting for tea to finish. Black did not suit her faded red hair; it made her features pasty, too, and accentuated her tallness.

She said she would go for a stroll that evening while they were busy with the details of to-morrow's will-reading and funeral. It would give them a chance to have a good look round.

In Mrs. Gussett's eyes Edna was a lady. Not only had she

class; but she had that rare gentleness and ease of bearing which made Mrs. Gussett declare that she could tell her a mile off. Years of business association and Mrs. Gussett's going up in the world had ripened their acquaintance. Some people could never forget that Mrs. Gussett had worked in the laundry with her own hands while it was still a small business: Edna never showed that she was aware of the fact. When Gussett became a J.P. and moved from the house in front of the laundry to 'The Towers,' Edna had never talked about the new rich, like some people: and that alone justified all that Mrs. Gussett said about her.

'What a time you've been having,' said Mrs. Gussett. 'But I suppose it's all for the best—though you won't let them relations do the dirty on you, will you?'

Edna smiled. 'There's nothing they can do, Mrs. Gussett. They can't take away from me what I possess within me.'

'You're not going religious, my dear?'

'Oh, no! Not religious, Mrs. Gussett, though I hope I remain a good churchwoman. . . .' Being with Mrs. Gussett calmed her. The touch of veneration and protection steadied her nerve. 'And I might add,' she said, 'that I never felt so well in my life.'

'Will there be much for you?'

Edna started. 'Much? Well, I haven't thought. Mother used to say that I should have the houses in Prospect Place. They're very poor, you know, but they bring in enough to live on.'

'You'll have to start thinking about that—soon as the will's read. Property isn't all money for jam these days.'

'But . . .' Edna checked herself. It was difficult to say what was in her mind, even to Mrs. Gussett. It was difficult to find words to describe the vast inconsequence of houses in Prospect Place in their relation to the joy that had conquered her.

'I should watch your step if I was you,' said Mrs. Gussett earnestly. 'You're going to find a big difference.'

Edna strolled back. The house was full of ghosts. The relatives, unable to restrain their curiosity and eagerness for booty, reverently scuttled about behind the closed blinds. The door of Mother's room had been locked, but they expressed a sudden desire to see her again before going to bed, and accordingly Edna unlocked the door and let them in.

They took rather a long time looking at Mother. When they came out Edna had gone to bed.

'She's taking it very badly, poor girl.'

'But she must have known it would happen sooner or later. There's no need for her to be quite so inconsolable, do you think?'

'Well my dear, whether it's grief or whether it's just rudeness she is certainly no credit to dear Mother's memory, going out and paying visits and treating us as if we were almost strangers. We really must keep an eye on her at the funeral to-morrow.'

About an hour before the mutes came, the will was read. They sat round the dining-room table, one eye on Edna and one on the lawyer. It began well. The money to be divided. The slum property to Edna. The effects to be divided or sold. Everyone nodded. This was just. Edna would be kept alive by the slum, like many another maiden lady; and they would acquire a benefit without responsibility.

There was more to come, however. Mother, with her fondness for underdone beef and breezy unpleasantness, was to have the last word. Edna had been a good girl: she had been made aware of her sense of duty: she had been willing, though unenterprising. Mother admired enterprise.

Therefore, said the will, if Edna was *earning* five pounds a week within a month of the funeral she was to take possession

of the silver teapot, the fine cutlery, and all the plate and jewellery, which, as Fanny said afterwards, was worth the whole estate put together.

Edna, grey and motionless with the rest of them, listened to the ponderous sardonic joke which was Mother's last. The tears danced in her eyes with suppressed laughter when she saw the half-smiles they could not suppress, their seemingly faint plaudits of Mother's pleasantry.

She bowed her head. Work, real work separate from duty, from the burdensome never-ending duty of home.

All her life she had longed to plunge her hands and mind into something. Something useful, something constructive. She had envied Mrs. Gussett's early days in the laundry. She envied Mrs. Gussett's preoccupation now with worldly pursuits paying a dividend, but she herself desired to use her hands, liberating them from the tyrannical trifles of Mother's house.

Now, for the reward of the teapot and other valuables, she was invited to go and earn money. The excitement of such a suggestion shut out the polite questioning of the lawyer, the reassuring whispers that Edna would never learn to earn five pounds a week, the amused surprise at Mother's little joke.

How could it be done? How could she bring her tall, gaunt body, her excited freshly-articulating mind, her faded red hair and her broad splay feet to earn a living? She had dreamed of keeping a tearoom, a knitwear shop, a poultry farm, a typewriting bureau. Yet they needed experience and seemed out of the question.

All her joyous energy fizzed up, and yet she had not the confidence to make a choice. She wanted to choose slowly, quietly, during the infinite sunny days which were to come: but the thought of the teapot and the valuables, the furtive and discreet valuations in the eyes of the relatives plagued her.

'We are keeping an eye on Edna,' they told the lawyer. 'We think she's odd.'

'She has always seemed very businesslike to me,' he said. 'She managed the estate when the old lady was alive; and I should not be surprised to see her show a will of her own, now she is—er unattached.'

A will of her own! That was the danger. With Mother there to curb her, she had had her duty and no more. Now it was evident, by her avoidance of company and by her unfathomable manner, that she might do something quite on her own; and, with all the valuables involved, she would have to be watched.

The undertaker was already in the house; and the procession was due to start in a quarter-of-an-hour's time. Upstairs the ladies dressed in the outdoor clothes they had had made for the occasion; downstairs the gentlemen brushed their hats and discussed the undertaker's bill.

When Edna came down they were all assembled, adjusting one another for the last time, and looking in the long mirror in the drawing-room. They were as black as crows.

'Why, Edna, you're not going to wear that fruit hat!'

'Surely not at Mother's funeral!'

'We're all in full mourning. . . .'

'Haven't you a black one, Edna?'

'Yes,' she said with a tight hard look, as if she were holding something back. 'I think I have.'

'If there was any difficulty you need only have said. Cousin Sid knows of a place where hats can be dyed in an hour or so.'

'There was no difficulty. I prefer this one.'

It was mauve, this fruit hat of Edna's, of a pattern rare in these days—more is the pity—a pattern built rather than put together, constructed rather than hazarded.

Its shiny straw rose to a noble crown, smooth and regular

as a bowler; but its glory was its brim, wide and strong enough to bear its adornment without strain, shapely enough, moreover, to show it to advantage, to the admiration of beholders and pride of the wearer.

The fruit was handsome stuff, boldly conceived, and executed to such a perfection of sheen and liveliness as to make every mouth water. It was of the cherry family; but what a celestial cherry. Black, purple, crimson, and yellow, it clicked and danced against a garnishing of grass, leaves and poppy buds as the hat moved through the air.

Here was a gaiety unknown to the black hats of the relatives, hats of felt, of velvet, of feathers, of fur. The fruit hat was eternally spring-like, conveying the promise of summer in every one of its buds, its ripening fruit, and its mellowing grass blades. It was a comely hat, a poetical hat, a timeless hat, full of meaning, of virtue, of plenty.

Edna looked well in it.

Not only did its colour lighten the dolour in which her self-control held her fast, but it added a spiritual touch to the gathering of mourners.

'We all have preferences in hats, Edna, but this is hardly the time to show them.'

'And with Mother not yet in her grave. Really, Edna, I'm a little surprised.'

'I'm sorry, you see, Edna, but you may not realize; you've lived such a sheltered life. A fruit hat is not . . .'

'I shall wear this hat.' She said it commandingly. The fruit hat coolly nestling upon her faded red hair gave her courage. A kind of goodness went through her; she could face their indignation without fear of showing her joy. She was mistress of herself now. She stamped her foot: and the fruit tittered merrily.

'But Edna, this is an outrage.'

'Grief at losing Mother has turned her mind.'

'Callousness, you mean. Poor Mother. . . .'

Handkerchiefs were brought out. Though the undertaker discreetly beckoned at the door, the relatives huddled round Edna.

'I appeal to you, Edna, take off that fruit hat. It's upsetting everyone.'

'It will disgrace all of us.'

'Think of Mother, Edna. She remembered you. She has left you all those houses in Prospect Place.'

Edna moved to the door with dignity. 'I think it's time to start. I shall travel in the first carriage.'

They followed. They had lost.

'We ought to have kept an eye on her.'

'For our own sakes as much as hers, we must get her off quietly to a furnished room at Bournemouth or some nice place. . . .'

'She might be crazy enough to get herself a job: and that stuff is absolutely wasted on her.'

'Mother never meant her to have it.'

'Well, she's not got a job yet: and if she starts flaunting herself like this in finery when she should be in mourning, she's less likely than ever. . . .'

'It's not the hat so much—though that is bad enough—it's that look she gave us.'

That look. Edna felt it too. She was majestic in that moment. All the power of her suppressed treasure had been in it. The hat had become part of her, another sense, an added character, a living addition to her stature.

There was quite a crowd at the funeral. It was early closing day for one thing; and then Mother's part in collecting money for local charities had brought, in time, the reputation for being a good old lady devoted to charitable works. It

was overlooked that she had charged for stamps in all the correspondence in which, being almost bedridden, she had been entailed.

The relatives stood a little apart from Edna to demonstrate their implicit disapproval of the fruit hat, which had aroused the curiosity of everyone.

'She would never have dared to do it if the old lady had been alive,' said the onlookers.

'Perhaps she doesn't know she's got it on.'

'Of course she knows! Look at the way she's wearing it. I've never seen Miss Edna look so proud.'

They lowered Mother's corpse; and Edna listened to the birds. Never had they sung so beautifully as on this early summer afternoon. She was at one with them; and would have sung, too, had it not been for the eyes of the relatives pricking her back like darts, and the respectful eyes of the crowd come to see the last of Mother.

She was at one with nature, too, with the budding roses and the graveyard grass, with the lusty smell of new-cut turf and the light wind which blew out the feathery elms. On a neighbouring tombstone stood a thrush, yellow-throated and loud. She caught his eye: and the onlookers were sorry for her, standing looking at the thrush, the symbol of nature living on amidst death.

But the thrush, well-groomed and greedy, saw no symbolism.

No sooner was the coffin grounded, than he was up on the brim of Edna's hat, his beak an inch from a purple cherry, his tail erect for all to see.

The clergyman faltered, his eye fixed on the bird, his mind taken up with the unusual spectacle. There was a rustling, nudging sound from the crowd at this moment when one would have expected reverent silence. The relatives kept glancing quickly and then looking away over the trees.

'How can she stand there!' someone whispered. 'This is too horrible.'

'Cousin Sid ought to tell her and ask her to move.'

'She knows. She was looking at it when it came.'

She knew; but she was happy, she was one with nature. She was possessed with a kind of goodness.

Again the clergyman faltered, this time without recovery. Everybody gaped at Edna's hat. The thrush was eating the fruit with deliberate enjoyment. After he had eaten several, Edna indulgently murmured, 'That's enough now,' and he flew away.

Then it was noticed that several of the hat's poppies were coming out in the sun, blue ones as well as red, that the grass was waving in the breeze, and that a snail was ambling across the red and white leaves.

How they finished off the burial of Mother nobody knew, with the clergyman saying things in the wrong order, the mutes clumsy in their preoccupation, and the crowd openly concerned with Edna's hat.

Edna was neither embarrassed nor distressed. She took it for granted. All day, she thought, I have felt goodness rising through my head. That must have been what made me wear the hat.

'I feel quite well,' she said afterwards.

'But you made a public exhibition of us,' they said.

'I wasn't aware that anyone was looking at you.'

'But the family, Edna! You made a public disgrace of Mother's funeral.'

'It was a perfectly normal funeral. Mother was buried.'

'But you can't have birds in your hat. Fruit is bad enough.'

'Cousin Sid has chickens on his roof in Kensington. Why shouldn't I have an occasional bird in my hat?'

'But, Edna, how do you grow the stuff?'

'It's just goodness going up through my hair. I couldn't keep it in any longer. I think it began when they were lowering the coffin.' She spoke casually, but she cowed them.

'We must keep this to ourselves, at all costs.' That evening the mourners forgot possessions to discuss Edna's hat. Twice young men called to inquire if it was true that there had been an incident at the funeral. Fortunately Edna had gone out to visit Mrs. Gussett and an emphatic denial could be given. 'That it will get about is absolutely certain even if we deny it. It will be very damaging to all of us.'

'She's bewitched. There's probably something evil at the bottom of her. Couldn't Cousin Sid ring up one of those occult people?'

They fretted and sweated and tried to argue each other out of it. They arrived at no explanation. Edna seemed to accept it as a matter of course. Mother had made her last joke when she had put the conditions in the will.

Not even her bucolic sense of humour, always such a trial, could have contrived the miraculous growth of Edna's hat. No, it was a freak of nature, but one which involved all of them, as it reflected upon their integrity, their respectability, and their public appearance. Some explanation would have to be given.

'Another young man from the *Daily Light* has called, and Cousin Sid says he won't go away. He says he's standing there with a man with a camera.'

'What would Mother have said . . .'

'That is not the point. We have our own position to consider. We mustn't let them think *it* runs in the family.'

'Well then, Cousin Sid can tell them what she says, that it's goodness coming up through her. . . '

'Nobody's going to believe that. And it's a terrible thing to say, the day you've buried Mother.'

They waited for Edna to come back, and the camera-man

waited. They lifted a corner of the blind: and a shiver went through them when they saw the gentlemen of the Press, like a garrison round the house.

Several of them put on their hats then, to be ready for any emergency. Sharp words were spoken as to the advisability of allowing Edna to be interviewed.

Mother's possessions were forgotten: reputation, most valuable of all, was in jeopardy. Several of them packed their bags: it would not do to take too many risks trying to save Edna from her enjoyment of her own situation. 'Let her help herself,' they said, 'if she hasn't the decency to stand in with us and explain herself.'

Tension grew. More reporters arrived, a policeman, and a few curious neighbours. 'It's enough to make Mother turn in her grave,' they kept saying when the silence irked them. They stood up, after a time. They stood by their luggage; for the inactivity and suspense unnerved them.

They stood by the door and sent Cousin Sid to the window to watch round the corner of the blind. The house, relieved of Mother's corpse, was even more sombre.

As they waited, they could hear the stairs creaking and the maid in a distant pantry preparing tea. Edna would be back for tea: and afterwards they were to have gone through the rooms, as everyone had agreed that it would be easier to take away small articles immediately.

Cousin Sid was to have made arrangements with Edna about going into furnished rooms: and then he had to explain his scheme about placing the houses in the hands of a friend of his who, for only a small percentage, would collect the rents and see that there was no nonsense about repairs. Edna was to have been made comfortable.

Now they waited, watching Cousin Sid at the window; and when he said 'Here she is!' they tiptoed across the room.

They let the blind up so that they could all see.

Edna was surrounded by reporters. Only the fruit hat was visible. The group slowly moved towards the house. What was Edna saying to them? What would they say about Edna? What would the world think of the family now? A shudder went through the mourners.

'This is infamous.'

'But we can't stop it. We can't do anything.'

'We can keep clear, though. . . .'

'What, with Mother hardly cold in her grave?'

'There's the back door.'

'So there is. . . .'

The maid, who had been filling the silver teapot, put it down with a clatter when she saw the black, hurrying relatives. Unsteadily they passed through the back door and scrambled between the evergreens to the tradesmen's entrance. They carried their luggage and they were complaining in whispers. The maid was glad to see them go. Though she didn't mind a death in the house, relatives were troublesome. She finished filling the teapot and went to tell Miss Edna.

Edna was flushed, and a little breathless. She nodded happily on hearing that they had gone. All constraint left her: and she invited the newspapermen to come in and have tea. They pulled up the blinds and enjoyed tea from the silver pot. Edna beamed, she tingled all over with goodness.

For ten years she had waited for this moment, to be mistress of the house that had imprisoned her, to feel her own life in the room, individual and dominant. The relatives had fled; in a few weeks the rooms, which had fattened and grown dank on her labours, would be cleared. She would be alone: and the summer would warm her bones.

'The goodness is bursting out of me,' she had said to Mrs. Gussett. 'Ought I to tell people? They will wonder about my hat, you see.'

'Your hat is your own,' Mrs. Gussett had said in her practical way. 'Your life is your own. It's no business of other people, dear, least of all those serpents—don't think I mean it ill—your relatives. I never heard of anybody growing fruit and vegetables like this, and I asked Gussett and he hadn't either; but since it's happened to you I'd take it as if you'd meant it to happen. And, come to that, Gussett says there might be an honest penny in it, if you were inclined.'

'A job?' she had said quickly.

'Of course. It would be a rare attraction in an exhibition, or say, at a flower show; or one of the big London stores might take you up. Gussett generally knows what's what when it comes to business.'

So Mother's little joke, her last sneer, might yet be in vain! Gripping the silver teapot Edna put it to the newspapermen.

'I was wondering,' she said, 'if it would lead to a job.'

They said it would, and ate her scones and strawberry jam the quicker, their eyes on the fruit hat.

Edna, for the first time in her life, was happy under those glances. She had always thought that one day life would race through her like this. She sighed with happiness and agreed willingly to wear the fruit hat in bed, in case it should cease growing and wither.

The next day she was in all the newspapers; and the relatives nearly died of shame when they read about the funeral and how she had said she felt the goodness going up through her hair. That day she signed contracts with a film company, a Sunday newspaper, and a London store.

She agreed to broadcast in 'In Town To-night' on the next Saturday, to become a vice-president of a Wild Life Society, and to open a flower show. Mr. and Mrs. Gussett guided her, and tore up the begging letters; and the lawyer

kept ringing up to congratulate her on so swiftly fulfilling the terms of the legacy.

There was nation-wide excitement about Edna.

She took it calmly, saying she had always known something would happen when Mother died. Nothing else would happen, she said, now this had happened; and for a full year nothing did.

Then a lady who had flown upside down to America took her place in the London store, wrote her autobiography in the Sunday papers and broadcast in 'In Town To-night': and Edna took off the fruit hat because she said it tired her.

She still leads a wholesome, industrious life, though, keeping her houses so well that Cousin Sid says she is too eccentric to own property. Her goodness is regulated into channels now where it is less perceptible, though probably just as potent.

Certain people, influenced perhaps by her relatives, sometimes claim that it never happened, that it was a put-up job to obtain a silver teapot and other effects: but Edna is proof against uncharitable words. She says that it was just the sort of thing she had expected, though she could hardly have been expected to go on doing it. Wearing a fruit hat can be very tiring.

Health

HE PUT out his hand for a cigarette. Yellow daylight filled the strange room. He fumbled with the packet, his eyes half-closed against waking, against the strident light. The candlestick slid away from him and rattled down, spilling matches across the floor. That wakened him; and he crouched on the edge of the bed lighting the cigarette.

When he was back in bed he cursed because he had not pulled the curtains across. Cold air blew in upon him, so that it was impossible to doze. It was violent and fresh, this summer morning, and it made him feel dirty. It was eight o'clock and the house was still quiet. The maid would come perhaps. Fanny had one maid who looked after the children.

Fanny. How many years ago was it since Fanny kissed him gravely on the forehead and said she hated the sight of him? It was a summer morning like this, and he was seventeen, standing in the garden after breakfast, telling himself that he was in love with Fanny, in love with Fanny. Fifteen years ago; and now she invited him down to Larkhouse casually because he was a novelist; and because she moved among interesting people. He had made the journey, wondering why he shouldn't, telling himself that there was no reason on earth to prevent him from coming. James Tabbithorne frequently talked to himself.

Curious that there was nobody about, not even the children. Should I be up, he thought, or still asleep? Fanny's house is so strange. It has a kind of schoolroom vitality, as if everyone is waiting to hear the next bell.

The fingers of his right hand were yellowy with cigarette smoking. He glanced at them as he lay back on his pillow and he wondered if other people noticed them. People would look at him distantly, allowing a hint of indifference to creep into the voice. They would discard him with a gesture. He knew it all, his failure to hold people. He pitied himself for it. He was cultivated because of his tongue, because of his pen. The reason why he was dropped was a profound mystery to him. The trouble was that he cared about it. This sensitivity was part of the nature of James Tabbithorne.

When he heard whispering outside the door he cleared his throat to show that he was awake, and ran his fingers hastily through his hair so as not to look ruffled and sleep-sodden. They banged on the door. 'Tabby,' they shouted, 'Tabby, wake up!'

He remembered them, their hot, embarrassing fingers pulling at his lapels, asking him for a nickname, what he had been called for short. He remembered their startling brown bodies on the lawn in the twilight before dinner.

'They've a craze for nicknames,' Fanny had said when he arrived. 'You must think of one, James. Annette's thirteen, and ought to know better. She's christened Batsy; and Joseph, he's ten. He's plain Josh.'

James Tabbithorne, feeling them pressing against him, strangely light like the ripe corn, had tried to think if anyone had given him a nickname. No, of course, they hadn't. But at school, yes, when he was a new boy, they had said, 'Tabby' in derision. So he said 'Tabby' to Fanny's children, rather pleased to be called by the strange name.

'Wake up, Tabby. You said you would.' They began to laugh, and then the door was thrown open and they were in the room. James pulled the bedclothes round himself. He was convinced that they would pull him out of bed.

'Smoking!' said Batsy. 'Did you ever hear of anything like that? A man smoking in bed!'

'Tabby smoking in bed!' shouted Josh. Everybody in the house must have heard that. Everybody in the house would hear him pulled out of bed. Tabby, in self-defence, began to reason with Josh and Batsy.

'Can you imagine a man,' he said to Josh, 'who didn't smoke in bed? Do you think that any grown-up man could be reasonably expected to get up in the morning without having smoked in bed?'

They were impressed. They had seen very few grown-up men in bed and it occurred to them that Tabby was teaching them something. It would be a pity to destroy Tabby's smoke.

'You're going to take us, aren't you?' they said.

'Where to?'

'Swimming—in your car.'

He had promised them while they were helping him back the car away the night before. He had been anxious to please them, to be friendly with Fanny's children because of the dread he felt as soon as he was with Fanny. For her life at Larkhouse was alien to him; the events that had taken place there since his last visit; her marriage, Adrian's death, her children. Her children would be terrifying, he thought: he knew he would feel shy with them, he would wish to dismiss them brusquely as he usually managed to dismiss adolescent things—cabbages, he would say, and other green things; they are of no interest until they are cooked. Of what interest could they be to him, to his cosmopolitanism, to his wit, to that treasure of his, his sensibility. James Tabbithorne was famous enough to be complacent about his consciousness; he knew what kind of sensibility to have. It had matured, worn smooth as a cigarette-case in the pocket. Coming down to see Fanny at Larkhouse was a bet with himself: but he knew she kept good company, and even though she had rather pointedly excluded Jeremy from the invitation, he would

not be bored. An occasional week-end away from Jeremy did one good. Poor Jeremy, he hated being without the car.

Josh sat heavily down upon James' feet and hiccupped because he had been eating an apple rather quickly.

'Would you care for the rest?' he said, 'it'll keep you going till breakfast.' He offered the half of a windfall from the garden. It was yellow, like the morning outside, and the same colour as Josh's hair. James forgot to answer.

'Let Tabby get up,' said the girl, 'or we won't be back for breakfast.' She lugged her brother off the bed, causing James intense pain. She was tall and strong for her age, and she was warm-looking like a gipsy; not like their mother at all, either of them, thought Tabby, so quick-witted and warm, as if they had grown up out of the earth. Like Adrian, I suppose.

'Well, you go and get the garage open—while I dress,' he said.

'You won't want much on,' said Josh, who was wearing a striped singlet and pungent corduroy shorts.

'Go as you are, Tabby,' said Batsy, helpfully.

Tabby sighed when they had shut the door. He felt as if he had been in danger. He felt intimidated, but nevertheless, a little stubborn. They had ordered him about, damn them! He looked at himself carefully, how he looked in blue pyjama tops and flannel trousers. And who, in the last twelve years, had ordered him about, had bothered to order him about?

The drive was a success.

'Decent car you've got,' Josh examined the dashboard.

'Can you go any faster?' said Batsy.

'There's a straight bit of road round the next corner,' said Josh, making sure about the speedometer, 'she's marked up to 80-m.p.h., Batsy . . .'

'Well, do it!' She prodded Tabby and bounced up and down in the back of the car.

They nearly did it, the summer morning screaming by their ears, the scents of hay and hedge and lime rushing one after the other into the car. They glowed with the excitement of the air. But when they touched seventy between two corners, Tabby suddenly throttled down and used the brakes. He felt guilty, cursing himself for the excitement of the moment before. He who with Jeremy never did more than fifty-five, to do seventy, in cold blood, on an unknown road, with Fanny's kids! He felt sick at the thought of what might have happened. He wanted to tell them not to tell Fanny, but he didn't know how to begin. Batsy leant forward and put her arms round his shoulders, her fingers spreading out across his chest.

'Seventy!' she gasped, 'did you see that, Josh? Dear Tabby!'

They felt the sun again, and they turned into a field where the river was. The children got out and began to run, and Tabby, carrying a bath towel, feeling like a nursemaid on her first job and wondering at the awe of such responsibility, ran too. Thank God his acquaintances could not see. He threw away a newly-lighted Turkish cigarette and concentrated on the unusual action.

They ran along the river bank toward an old hump-back bridge in the middle of the water meadows. They dodged willow trees and skipped the small inlets where the cattle came to drink. Buttercups and the wiry stalks of milkmaids caught at their ankles: and the ground was hard, cracked with the long summer. Josh and Batsy reached the bridge and sat over the arch swinging their legs, and Tabby, emerging from the willows some two hundred yards behind, decided to walk the rest. He was sweating already and out of breath. His pyjama tops were billowing over his trousers and he longed to take them off and flop gently into the river with the cows. He loved the movement of swimming, the relaxa-

tion of the body so surely balanced in the water. Long ago he had practised secretly and seriously until he excelled at it.

'Come on, Tab,' they shouted. 'Buck up Tabby.'

He waved the huge towel at them and looked anxiously along the bank to see if the water ran deeper. At the bridge the river was joined by a weedy, disused canal; and the confluence had once been guarded by a lock. It was seventy years since the canal had been used—to carry flour from the mill now called Old Mill Road-House on the Sutchester By-Pass Road—and all that remained was one half-sunken gate and a deep pool inhabited by an old pike who remembered the lock being made. Tabby noted with satisfaction the darker water by the bridge, and they shouted to him again.

'Come on, Tab,' said Josh. 'Undress up here. What do you bet me I don't go off the bridge?'

'Bet him nothing, Tabby. He only falls off,' came Batsy's voice.

As he approached they ran down from the bridge to meet him. They were naked. Batsy opened her arms as she ran, treading gingerly because of the rough grass. She had the gait of a woman already, of Fanny, her mother, and, as she faced the sun, she shone a coppery gold colour. Her girl breasts threw no shadow. They were rigid when she ran.

'We'll wait for you,' she said, taking the arm of Tabby who had driven at seventy miles an hour. But Josh fell in off the bridge and scrambled out, following them, shaking water at them. He, too, was golden—there had been a long summer at Larkhouse—and his light hair was like spiky silver glass when he scattered water from it. Tabby wished he could have gone in like Josh, though the idea of swimming before breakfast was associated in his mind with habits like dirty eating.

'Well, I'm here,' he said. 'Let's see you dive, Batsy.'

'Not till you're ready,' she said.

'Me?' said Tabby. 'Oh, I haven't got my things. I'm not good at early morning barbarism. I envy you'; he said that too personally; and he began to blush, posed like the grave photograph of a famous young author in front of the thirteen-year-old girl. Josh was barbarous, kicking him with a wet muddy foot.

'Things?' cried Batsy.

'What *do* you want things for,' said Josh. 'I don't wear things. I like feeling the water.' He glanced up and down his perfectly shaped red-skinned body. 'Just take 'em off and dump them like I have,' he said.

'Yes, and do hurry up, Tabby,' said Batsy, 'you can't fuss about clothes now.'

James Tabbithorne was left without words. He knew at once that he must dare. If he did not undress he would have to answer the question 'Why not?' He shrunk from that, even as a liar may shrink from the final exonerating lie. He was ashamed, as if he were soiled, unhealthy, and deformed, instead of massaged, manicured, and as carefully kept as a racehorse. He knew he must dare.

'It's supposed to be very healthy—before breakfast,' said Batsy as she sat on the bridge watching him undress.

'Healthy? Well, I've generally managed without it,' he said. But he kept his head down not to see her hot black eyes and Josh's green eyes: and to himself he went on with the sentence: without what? Not early morning bathing surely? Why did she sit there like a woman, like a she-goddess spreading out her thighs on the parapet of the bridge. He dreaded her eyes upon him, inquisitive, as he undressed slowly. He was abashed at the exhibition of his dry chalky-white body by the side of Josh who pranced so small and so gainly. The James Tabbithorne who laughed metallically and said that he always got what he wanted examined with horror this sudden

white cringing Tabby who feebly struggled with the invisible garments of sensibility which did not fit.

'You *are* white,' said Josh, 'don't you ever go swimming?'

'I don't get all the time you do,' Tabby answered like a schoolboy defending himself. He was angry because he was not brown like them. He was suddenly humiliated because he was naked. And Batsy laughed like Fanny, her mother, when he plunged about awkwardly trying to stand on one foot. It was mad, this. Why had he given way, frivolously given himself away?

He was being natural, he kept telling himself, he was being natural. When he stood up before them naked he said it again, in the teeth of the reproach of the calm August morning. His own jeers followed him on to the parapet of the bridge.

Then the three of them went in off the bridge, into the green pool, disturbing the artful sleep of the old pike who winked across at the white body of the man as if it were the devil himself. What shall I tell Fanny, thought the body as it rose gracefully to the surface.

Nobody but you would need to tell her anything. Nobody but you, James Tabbithorne, my sensitive friend.

The Last Word

THEY CALL it a Repository Sale: and it is held every now and then in the cattle market behind the Eagle. Most Sisterley people slip in there early in the morning to look the stuff over. They tell one another that this is just a morning stroll, as they don't want to buy anything. Neither do they, but everything is sold by the end of the afternoon, and fetches good prices.

In Sisterley we rather pride ourselves upon our acumen. We would not consider it prudent to look as if we wished to buy something at an auction. On the contrary we like it to appear that we happen to be passing, and that chance and a sudden fancy direct us to catch the eye of Mr. Love, the auctioneer. Nevertheless we seldom miss auction sales and take a social interest in every transaction. Nor does the more experienced of us fail to enjoy the spectacle at the finish, of people removing the articles they have bought—of one of the Damson girls with a bundle of lithographs (which could only mean that something was in the wind at last), or of Mrs. Winnart with a chinese lacquer commode. It must be conceded, too, that this pleasure is not unmingled with bitterness on the part of those who have bid against Mrs. Winnart or Miss Damson.

Corky Legg attends every sale in the four parishes. He is generally to be seen close to the rostrum, tense and immobile, attentive and omniscient. He undertakes small commissions for those who are too timid, too proud, or too busy to come and bid. Occasionally he strikes a real bargain for himself;

and at all times he supports that optimist, Mr. Love, when he makes a pun.

It was Corky Legg who first introduced the subject of Lot 93 to the bar of the Eagle the day before the Christmas Repository Sale. '*Light four-wheeled van*, he calls it in the catalogue,' said he. 'That shows the way George Love tries to make the best of things.'

'Light four-wheeled van!' We laughed. 'That's a good one!'

Lot 93 was a delicate, not very capacious, but useful hearse. We saw it in the wintry light of the yard, jet and shiny amid the agricultural instruments, the poultry appliances, the second-hand building materials. It was a little thing, meant to be drawn by a black caparisoned pony, handy for country lanes, for the cobbled side streets of Sisterley, or for narrow churchyard walks. It had been given by the old Duke (who had a mania for anything on wheels after he had inaugurated the Dunworthy railway) to an outlying parish on his estate. Corky Legg, therefore, had not only pencilled a great cross beside it in his catalogue for the sake of the value of the thing; but also on account of its associations.

'I bet there's been nobility that's rode in that hearse,' he stated. 'As well as ordinary people.'

Ornate and dignified, ancient yet well preserved, the little forlorn vehicle confronted us. 'That would have its uses . . .' we said.

We said, 'There's many could do with it, when all's said and done. . . .'

'Give it a coat of white, of course . . .' we said.

Its floor was fair and square but for two discreet rollers upon which heavy weights might smoothly slide. Its shafts were shapely and strong. Its wheels were picked out in streaks of silver. The canopy was its distinction, at once serene and simple, suggestive of the solemnity of the dead and

the honour due to the living who thus served the dead. It was suspended upon four plain uprights as a formal and final protection from wind and weather. Each side of it was decorated with pelmets of black wired wool, sensitive alike to sombre breezes and to the motion of a funeral progress.

'Shouldn't wonder if Sam Folly couldn't do with that,' somebody said. 'Give it a coat of paint and that would make a topping little van for fruit and veg.'

'Or an ice cream van. . . .'

'Them things is all passed,' said Corky Legg rather sharply. 'It's all done by tricycles nowadays.'

'Or I daresay they'd have a use for it at Lobbs Farm for carting jobs. . . .'

'Too light,' said Corky Legg. 'That's not made to travel across ploughed fields.'

It was not difficult to see that Corky had formed ideas about the usefulness of the hearse: and we were not surprised to see him in and out of Sam Folly's greengrocery shop that afternoon.

The morning of the sale was wintry and sparkling, illuminating the yard behind the Eagle and filling the optimistic heart of Mr. Love with bitterness. He dreaded selling on cold days. The bidding became morose; his own descriptive exhortations became dulled; puns fell as flat as wafers.

It was a pity that he missed seeing Sam Folly and Corky Legg standing in the yard long before most people were about. It was a pity that he missed seeing the fires that kindled in Sam's vegetable eyes upon being persuaded of the trim beauty of the little hearse upon which the frost still sparkled. It was more than a pity that that usually optimistic auctioneer missed the nudges, the grunts, the chortles, the confidential murmurs, with which Sam Folly indicated to Corky Legg that this was the sort of light van he had desired to find second-hand for many years.

'Just what I thought,' said Corky Legg, tapping out his pipe in a triumphant tattoo against his wooden leg. 'Just what I thought the moment I saw it, Sam Folly. That's the van for fruit, I said! A little thought, mind you, a little imagination. . . .'

He winked and Sam Folly almost blushed, his hands fidgeting with the folds of his striped apron. He said:

'You're right there, Corky. That you are. And I daresay you'd be the one to look after it for me at the sale. I mean, you know a thing or two about sales, eh, Corky!'

'Anything to oblige, Sam Folly. And I don't suppose that'll fetch much. There's not everybody would see the uses for that little old hearse—and I don't mind telling you, there's been some took their last ride in that vehicle, nobility and all.'

Sam Folly's vegetable eyes winked with pleasure and he said: 'Bidding or no bidding, Corky, we'll have that, so long as it's anything in reason; though, of course, it won't do for me to look like wanting it. . . .'

'Leave it to me, Sam Folly. You come and stand next me at the sale. Then I'll know I'm not stretching you. There's not everybody would see the uses for such a vehicle.'

That was said in a confidential voice, as Sam Folly hurried away to his business, or it might have reached the sharp ears of Mrs. Yallow who appeared in her bath-chair at the far side of the yard and said 'Ha! A hearse, a decent little hearse! The very thing to be buried in.'

'Oh, Mrs. Yallow, you mustn't talk like that,' said her new paid companion.

'Nonsense. Everything has its uses. What more useful purpose for a hearse than to carry a coffin? I've got to go in a coffin, so have you. The way you shy at everything you'll be in one before I am. Let's have a look at it. Ah, yes.'

Mrs. Yallow sighed a cloud of frosted breath. For many

years she had devoted herself to a campaign against motor cars, to the exhaustion of a series of paid companions and to the satisfaction of the local Press in whose columns her views caused incessant controversy. She opposed arterial roads (the Dunworthy by-pass was her most famous lost cause): she railed at pedestrian crossings: she denounced the immoralities of parking places: she stressed the dangers of motor cycling: she placed at the door of motoring (and rightly many of us thought) the incipient collapse of the world outside Sisterley. So naturally the arrival of Adams' motor hearse and the mechanization of his undertaking business had exercised her mind over the problem of dying without the indecency of petrol traction.

'Ah, yes. The very thing,' she said, tapping the small elegance of the wheels with her stick. 'A decent carriage for any corpse.'

'Oh, Mrs. Yallow.'

'I have taken a fancy to that hearse, my dear; and no snivelling of yours will prevent my having it. There is plenty of room in the coach house, and I don't suppose it will fetch very much. Just leave me for a few moments while I talk to Love about it.'

There was never any question but that Mrs. Yallow was going to die: she discussed all the details of it herself. The question which interested most of us, for one reason or another, was when. Her death would come to mean something to us. 'The year Mrs. Yallow died' would probably be a solid mark in the years. To Mr. Love it would mean a probate valuation, followed by an auction sale of some distinction.

'Yes, Mrs. Yallow,' he beamed, approaching her chair, 'what can we do for you to-day?'

'I want that hearse, Mr. Love.'

'Aha! that useful little vehicle—let me see, yes—Lot 93.'

Very easily convertible, Mrs. Yallow, for almost any purpose . . . we'll see what we can do.'

'I want it as a hearse—for my funeral, Mr. Love. None of your conversion nonsense.'

'But, Mrs. Yallow. . .' The auctioneer was teased, like every optimist, with notions of death.

'Business is business, Mr. Love. How much do you think it'll fetch?'

He mentioned a price, a good price.

'I'll go to double that, even more. Your man can do the bidding for me. But understand; I must have that hearse.'

Mr. Love, in spite of the cold and the time of the day, bowed. He instructed Joe, his head porter, to put in the bids, and as Joe is always deaf in the mornings, it was not long before most of Sisterley had heard it. News travels up Sisterley High Street at about the speed of a middle aged man on a bicycle, so it is not difficult to see that it would outpace a bath-chair pushed by a new paid companion. Corky Legg had time to lean his bicycle against Folly's shop front and to speak with some emphasis to Sam by the time Mrs. Yallow arrived to buy greengrocery.

'I hear you've been looking round the sale, Mrs. Y.' said Sam with ponderous unconcern. 'Not much there to-day.' He pursed his lips. Mrs. Yallow and he had been at Dunworthy Grammar School together: and, though some might now say that their ways had parted, he was one of the few who was able to adopt the familiar use of the initial in addressing her.

'As a matter of fact, Sam Folly, there's the most useful thing I've seen for a long time, a very handy hearse.'

'What! You going to buy yourself a hearse, Mrs. Y?' Sam Folly laughed.

Mrs. Yallow said: I wouldn't say that I'm certain to buy it but I don't mind telling you that I've made up my mind to.'

'Look here, Mrs. Y. I know it's none of my business, but . . .'

Corky Legg, who was listening in the cash desk, said afterwards that things turned nasty as suddenly as somebody switching off a light. We are not without our small conflicts in Sisterley, but this fairly roused all of us. We took sides. We said that she was fanciful or that he was stubborn. We said business is business: we said death is death. Corky reported that Mrs. Yallow's parting remark to Mr. Folly that morning had been 'if it would put you out, Sam Folly, I would die to-morrow.'

We said that it was tempting fate. It was.

But next came the sale itself. Corky Legg, tapping out his pipe on his wooden leg as they finished with Lot 89, and beginning to look straight up into the air. Sam Folly nudging him and pretending to pick up things off the ground. Mrs. Yallow being wheeled hither and thither like a boxer manœuvring for position. Deaf Joe, the porter, being hollered at in huge whispers by the old lady. It was said that several people (including Taff, the barber), closed their shops during this part of the sale. So many spectators, indeed, piled up on Lot 95, which happened to be a farm wagon with a rotten bottom, that it gave way and Mrs. Winnart's umbrella she had had for twelve years was broken. A difference of opinion, you see, was always an interesting event in Sisterley: but an open conflict at an auction sale appealed to the best sporting instincts and a desire by all to see fair play.

'Now what offers, ladies and gents, for Lot 93, a *light four-wheeled van*,' said Mr. Love at last, silencing the shuffling, the creaking of Mrs. Yallow's chair, the coughing.

'In a very nice condition, as you see . . .' he added, aware that no words of his could do justice to the appetite of the crowd.

'Now, what can I say?'

There was all the reluctance to engage of two seemingly indomitable forces, all the dreadful inertia of wild things sprung for the attack, all the nervous void between aimed guns. There was silence.

'Come along, ladies and gents, please! What can I say? What can I say for this very handsome little vehicle?'

The rooks cawed in the top of the elm trees behind the Eagle. There was silence.

Then, as if some summons was blown by thin far-away whistles in his deaf head, Joe said with shocking precision, 'Arf a crown, guv'nor.'

There was surprise amid the onlookers, the thirsty whispers of first blood drawn, a gust of appreciative laughter; and the voice of Mr. Love in a crescendo of dismay:

'Come, come, ladies and gents, this is wasting your time and mine.'

They wasted no more. Neither Corky Legg nor deaf Joe. After a jerky overture of half crowns, they soared easily into pounds. Mrs. Yallow swayed in her chair with metronomic intensity. Sam Folly glared straight in front of him. Only Joe moved to and fro, busying himself with a notebook, with cryptic decisiveness, much assisted in this from the fact that he was boss-eyed. Corky Legg, unready for these mobile tactics, had to shift slightly from time to time to keep an eye on him without appearing to.

At five pounds the bidding broke down again to hesitant half crowns. Both parties were recovering their nerve and drawing themselves together for the next phase.

There was a new outburst of bidding, casting itself against the almost scared impartiality of Mr. Love like a solemn upward eddy of water. He did not wish to feel himself implicated. Mrs. Yallow, insofar as she was a potential death, was a potential customer. Sam Folly placed most of his money in real estate.

Assuming a slightly majestic tempo, the bidding was cast up at him, to be transmitted into his formula of persuasive words. At ten pounds, there was a dramatic check. Corky closed his eyes to enjoy a truly sporting suspense. Sam Folly trod on his foot. Sam was too anxious. He nodded.

'Ten, ten. Thank you, Mr. Legg. Eleven may I say? Eleven, thank you.' All too soon Mr. Love's eye was back on Corky. Then we all followed the auctioneer's look of surprise as he said, 'Eleven ten, thank you.'

Corky Legg hated being rushed. He often said he would rather lose an absolute gift than be rushed. Mr. Love was evidently rushing him now; but he kept his eyes closed, savouring the triumph which he hadn't even needed the effort to gain. 'Any advance on eleven ten. I am selling at eleven ten.'

A great prod from Sam Folly. Evidently jubilant. Corky smiled, but it was no good those who sided with him trying to catch his eye: both of them were shut.

'I am selling at eleven ten. All done?' said Mr. Love hurriedly, before anything more could be done to make Corky aware of the paid companion who stood behind him, and who, by arrangement with Joe, had made that last infinitely cunning bid.

'Gone,' Mr. Love said quietly, much relieved at the intervention of an apparently neutral party.

'Name please?'

'Yallow, Mr. Love, Yallow!' boomed the voice from the bath-chair close to his feet.

Corky Legg opened his eyes very wide indeed; and he muttered, 'Who'd have thought she'd have done a dirty trick like that,' though in all fairness it was mainly deaf Joe's triumph. It took him most of the evening to explain the unsporting nature of women, the stupidity of Mr. Love, and his own victimisation to Sam Folly. Sam Folly sat on a hard

chair in his parlour and said they had missed the only real business opportunity Sisterley had offered for years. He said: 'What come over you, Corky Legg? There you stood with your eyes shut: and everybody seemed to see that woman behind you but you. I saw her myself.'

'Then why didn't you bid?'

'Why, I thought you was holding off for the sake of cunning, that's what I thought. I thought you was taking your time.'

Corky sat with his head in his hands; and said at last: 'Perhaps she'd let you have it till she needs it, so to speak.'

'But that wouldn't do, unless I could paint it white: and she wouldn't want to ride in a white hearse.'

'Still, that isn't going to do any good shut up in her coach-house. Not that it will sit there for ever with this here cold, and February and March to come yet. She might go at any time.'

'I suppose she might,' said Sam brightening.

Of course it killed her. We remarked that she looked blue in her triumph when she was wheeled away from the sale. 'It won't be long before she has a ride in that vehicle either . . .' we said.

'And who'll come in for the stuff when she's gone?' said Sam Folly.

'That nephew that runs a garage somewhere at Harrow,' said Corky Legg. 'He wouldn't have a use for a hearse, don't you worry.'

Sam Folly worried though. He worried day and night because he had taken a fancy to the thing. He saw in it a new and daring adventure, a touch of style, an element of progress. When he heard that Mrs. Yallow had been 'about the same' for several days, he stopped the paid companion in the street and asked if she was well enough to consider a little proposition. The paid companion came back next day and

invited him to pay a visit: and, without saying a word to Corky Legg or the rest of us, he went in his best clothes to Mrs. Yallow's, and was rather astonished when she greeted him with the words:

'I suppose you've come about the hearse, Sam Folly.'

'Well I did wonder . . . I mean I wondered if . . .'

'If I was dead, I suppose? Now, listen to me, Sam Folly. I took a fancy to that hearse; and I intend to use it. Motors is the sin and corruption of the age. And that's that.'

'It's like this Mrs. Y. I got a little proposition in me mind. When it comes to riding in that there thing, you're going to want a neat pony to set it off. You don't want no old cart-horses, nor borrowed cab horses, nor donkeys on your last journey.'

Mrs. Yallow had not given a thought to traction. 'Well, what about it Sam Folly?' she said uneasily.

'You may have noticed that fat little black pony of mine that draws the fruit and veg van?'

'I suppose I have . . .'

'I am prepared to let you have that pony for the occasion in question if you will let me have the—er—little vehicle reasonable when you've been done with.'

Slowly Mrs. Yallow nodded, over and over again.

'Reasonable, Mr. Folly? What would that be?'

'Let's say perhaps the price you gave for it.'

'I don't call that reasonable. Where's the profit?'

'You can't expect to ride behind a pony like that in a vehicle that should be used for better things, and make a profit,' said Sam, a little too outspokenly, perhaps.

Mrs. Yallow drew herself upright for the last time, it is said, that she was ever seen vertical. She said: 'Did you say *better things*, Sam Folly?'

Sam always says he meant it as a figure of speech: and Corky Legg says he should have had somebody there to

advise him and explain what the figure was. Before he could explain anything more, Mrs. Yallow said, 'Very well, Mr. Folly, I agree to your proposition. My companion here is witness that you will supply a pony and I will let you have the van—most reasonably.'

Sam never liked the way she said this: but she settled comfortably into the horizontal and gave him no time to argue. The following Friday she died.

It was a rush getting the pony's coat clipped: but everything went with a swing. The little hearse made a novelty in Sisterley: and fortunately the funeral was on early closing day, so that full justice could be done to it, and there was no interference with the Christmas shopping.

They read the will after tea. So the Eagle saloon bar was scarcely open when the news came through about Sam Folly's legacy. We recalled the day of the sale, then, and laughed till they told us to mind the mourners didn't hear.

The little hearse was left as a gift to Sam provided 'he never harnesses it up for use with what he insolently calls "*better things*," namely, fruit and vegetables.'

We had great sport with the congratulations to Sam Folly on receiving such a useful legacy. 'Trust Mrs. Yallow to say the last word,' we said.

We said: 'And old Sam set his heart on that as a fruit van.'

'Serves him right for crossing the poor old lady,' we said.

Corky Legg seemed to feel that it reflected slightly on him. 'It'll take more than a blooming dead hand to throttle Sisterley enterprise,' he said. 'We'll soon see who has the last word.'

If it wasn't for him being the fine carpenter he is, with an inventive turn of mind and fearless originality in design; if it wasn't for him being inquisitive and persuasive over the exact terms of a will and the meaning of the phrase *to harness*

it up; if it wasn't for him being impervious to fun and to the just despair of poor Sam Folly, this last word would never have been spoken.

But this Christmas time you may meet it and stare your fill at it any day in Sisterley. It is the last word in brightness and mobility. For the body of the little hearse, with its canopy is mounted upon the chassis of an outmoded Ford and is painted red and white and blue with unaffected good taste. It is the last word in efficiency and progress because a Ford is more progressive than a horse and a fruit van of such delicacy and style is more efficient than a forlorn little hearse. It is the last word in legality and self-justification, because it requires no harnessing-up nor horses. No: it is splendid as a motor vehicle, ironically mocking the designs of one to whom motor vehicles were a symbol of man's decline.

It is the last word.

The Maids

'DON'T GO in there. That's the maids' room.' Young Miss Baynes nodded, and dropped her hand from the door handle. 'I don't need to see that, of course.'

'We always keep an eye on it. We look in every now and then. One is always hearing of them taking a fancy to things—not that we suspect ours for a minute——'

'No, no. I quite understand.'

'But it doesn't do to let them think one is entirely blind: and there's no harm in reminding them whose house it is. . . .'

'Exactly,' murmured young Miss Baynes. 'One cannot be too careful over trifles.'

They clung to trifles, indeed, as they clung to life itself. For theirs were lives composed of a multiplicity of little things, of rigid small notions heaped up, of close beliefs and fears stored in safety, of modest regular incomes, of careful expenditure, of comfort, of decent domesticity, of accustomed plenty, of complacent afternoons, of mornings innocent and unhurried, of ordered nights. There was neither want nor extravagance in their house. There was no great passion nor sorrow: and little laughter was heard.

Ada, the eldest, smiled and hugged herself in her chair when Jessie, young Miss Baynes, returned to the sitting-room.

'Comfortable, Jessie, isn't it?' she purred in her old voice.

'Very neat and comfortable, Ada,' Jessie smiled tightly in her turn.

'Now we're all together,' said Gertrude, 'it will be nice for all of us. Will I ring for tea?'

Ada nodded. She owned the furniture: and in running the house they deferred to her. She knew the world too, having married George and outlived him. Gertrude and Jessie knew nothing either of marriage or widowhood. Gertrude owned the freehold house, to be sure: but her experience of affairs had been limited to looking after Mother. Jessie, having been a confidential secretary in George's business, had business acumen and was good on the telephone. She was getting on too and would be the better for homely company.

'She brings the tea to us here. We don't take much. We don't seem to need it. You won't forget to lay for three now, Alice?'

'No, M'm,' said the thin maid.

'What a red nose Alice has,' said Jessie, the moment the door closed. 'In Mother's time she used to be quite nice looking.'

Gertrude raised her eyebrows, and sighed. 'We're hoping it's not what you might think it is. . . .'

They sipped tea in the sad green light. They were old ladies, imperceptibly ageing like ferns. The rain outside dripped on the moss of the rockery. How patient was death!

'Well, they've taken her round the house: and now I suppose she's settled for good.' The thin maid sighed. 'It'll make one more.'

'One thing, they don't eat a lot nor make much mess,' said Cook, characteristically folding her hands.

'Still three's three, Cook.'

'But not for long. The widow's not what she used to be.'

'Did you ask her about the range?'

'Yes: and she said we was to make do. None of us would live for ever, she said, and there ought to be a few more years in that old range, she said.'

'I wonder you don't give notice, Cook, working on a thing like that.'

'I wonder I haven't given notice these fifteen years.'

'I wonder we haven't both given notice.'

They sipped tea, enjoying its body. Cook spread the jam thickly on her bread and butter. They could hear the rain on the area steps: but Cook had pulled the curtains because rain gave her the pip. People hurried, up on the pavement. They were glad not to be out: and they wondered why they had not given notice. They discussed it once a week. They liked to think of it: it showed they were free, after all, and independent.

'Funny!' said the thin maid. 'What might we be doing now if we'd gone ten years ago—that Easter we nearly went, over the spring-cleaning.'

'I wonder,' said Cook, thinking of the lights of Hammer-smith Broadway on a Saturday night. Why did she think always of that same place and time? Why did she want that place and time over again?

The thin maid knew why. 'Time past's time past,' she said, 'I expect there are worse places.'

'Plenty of worse places. People with new fangled ideas, kids, dogs, smoking all over the house and wanting food all hours. . . .'

The thin maid nodded. They were better off where they were perhaps.

It took Ada six months to die: and that meant more work in the house.

Everybody wept at the death. The exercise seemed to do Cook good. 'Always enjoyed her food,' went the obligato. 'She was a pleasure to cook for, poor woman.'

'They've really behaved very well,' said Jessie, after the funeral. 'I think we might give Cook one of Ada's trinkets to remember her by.'

'So long as you don't give her the gold brooch,' said Gertrude. 'One mustn't let them think we encourage their wearing jewelry.'

Young Miss Baynes rearranged the house a little, moving her own things to Ada's room on the first floor, and making a store-room of her bedroom on the second.

'You'd better lock it up carefully,' said Gertrude, 'with maids in the house.'

The thin maid said, 'They can't take it with them, I wonder they worry about it. It's not much better than junk in any case.'

'They worry about everything,' said Cook. 'Except getting something done about the range.'

'You asked about it?'

'Yes, I asked about it. She said it's good for a few years yet.'

'So are we all.'

Gertrude died rather suddenly. She would have been flattered at the way they wept. She had been so deaf for years, however, that she would probably have suspected they were saying something under their breath as usual.

'She was always a bit out of things,' said Cook, 'on account of her infirmity, but she was never no trouble.'

'Except when she wanted things in bed,' said the thin maid.

Young Miss Baynes stood on the landing listening to the ticking of the clocks. It was all hers. She would have to lock all the doors if she was to keep an eye on it. Furthermore she not only had three brooches, she had three of everything.

'Oh dear!' she said. 'What a worry it is. I will go over it all once, and then decide about it.'

While the rain dripped and the people hurried, and the maids made tea in the basement, Jessie Baynes, feeling her age, ascended to the top of the house and firmly set her hand to the door handle of the maids' room.

The wind bellied the curtains: it was cold. Her foot caught in the tattered green oilcloth. She steadied herself against the deal chest of drawers, and looked round the maids' room closely for the first time. Here the two of them had lived for seventeen years. Here in these two wrought-iron bedsteads they had slept, while the wind rattled the high window. There were their tin boxes they had brought seventeen years ago. Clothes bulged behind curtains on the walls: an alarm clock ticked. There was nothing else in the room—nothing of hers but the beds, the chest of drawers, the thin oilcloth, the bellying curtains.

Miss Baynes sniffed and shivered. The stark room or the cold bereaved day made her shiver. She saw in the room their lives, bereaved, ticking away in the tin clock which woke them. How disgusting, how frigid, how joyless were their lives. She was glad she had never stayed in the room before. She was glad she had stayed among the home comforts downstairs and had seen the maids only when they served her. She distrusted them. They were fools—to live in that room they were inhuman.

She stopped little, going down through the house. She made up her mind when she reached the landing again. She had her own life still: she would cling to that. She would sell her possessions not to be worried by them.

She had tea and then she rang and said: 'Alice, I am giving up the house. I shall sell the things off and live in a hotel at Bath. I shall go to-morrow.'

The lawyer made all the arrangements and the maids showed people over the house until the day of the sale. Then the lawyer's clerk gave them their wages and they put on their outdoor things to go out together for the first time for seventeen years.

'Well, I suppose she'll die in Bath,' said Cook. 'They say people go there to die.'

'I suppose it's better than where we're going,' said the thin maid with sudden bitterness. Cook didn't answer for a minute, then she said. 'A month's trial gives us a chance to see if we like it. After seventeen years in a good house, we shall probably find it strange. This rain gives me the pip.'

'I got the pip, too,' said the thin maid. 'After all these years. . . .' She thought of the stark room where they had slept. She would like to have gone on sleeping there, to be woken up by the tin clock (Lot 341) and to gaze at the deal chest of drawers (Lot 343) before she got up.

'Anyone would think you owned the place,' said Cook. 'The way you've been to-day. And yet, you know, we very nearly gave notice and left that Easter over the spring-cleaning.'

'Why didn't we?' said the thin maid.

'I dunno,' said Cook.

They went up the narrow drive of the house where they were to have a month's trial. The lady of the house excitedly peeped at them from behind a curtain.

'You've got to take what you can get,' she said. 'It's impossible to find maids nowadays. I've taken these on a month's trial; so they'll just tide us over till we can find what we really want.'

'I can't understand why girls won't go into service, can you?'

'No,' said the lady, 'with a nice home, and their keep, *and* wages for pocket money—but I must run and let them in.'

The maids started their month's trial.

●

Dunworthy 13

THE NEW telephone exchange at Dunworthy was something of a landmark. It was the last building on the road along the arm of the estuary, the old road which had led to the submerged village of Duncaister.

There were a few houses, to seaward, before the road ended in estuary mud, but there was little traffic to keep the way open.

On December evenings the whole seaboard seemed to lie dead and exhausted beneath the white North Sea fret: there was bone in the ground, an edging of steely ice on the fringes of the saltmarshes. Nothing but desolation to invite man or beast along the road by the exchange.

Mr. Mullins, however, liked the exchange. It was bright, well lit and polished, like the inside of a ship. After many uneventful years at sea, night duty in such warm, efficient surroundings was a permanent joy. There were not many calls. One sat close to the radiator, made a cup of tea, and engaged in unlimited study of football competitions, racing results and crime.

The mist-laden wind rattled the windows. Mullins who played mid-on for Dunworthy second eleven, was reading about the M.C.C. tour. To think of anyone playing cricket on Christmas Eve: that required imagination!

He had been disturbed twice in the course of the long report of the tour: but he patiently took up the thread again. It was his custom to keep the more exciting news about the football draw until later.

His second cup of tea was raised to his lips when the buzzer sounded again. He suppressed a yawn. One must tolerate a little extra business in the Christmas season.

'Number, please?' He did his best to achieve an official unconcern: but involuntarily he muttered, a second later: 'What! You again?'

It was the same voice, a man's voice, strident, earnest, speaking right into the instrument, wanting to know the time.

Mr. Mullins jerked the head-phones into position over his ears. 'The time by the exchange clock is. . . . Excuse me, sir, but I don't see as how you *can* want to know the time again already. Seeing as I'm not the lady with the golden-haired voice,' he added maladroitly, to relieve his candour of any official significance.

'How long ago did I ask for it?'

'Just four minutes ago, it was. But then—you'll excuse me saying so, sir—you asked for it seven minutes before that.' The second cup of tea stood invitingly upon the switchboard. The greasy pattern of its surface reflected the bright lights.

'So it's now . . . er . . . three seventeen.' Slight relief was noticeable; a modification in the arrogance of the voice. Mr. Mullins, eyeing his cup of tea, felt kindly towards the stranger.

'Quite right, sir. Three seventeen a.m.; only you don't hardly need me to tell you that. Wasting your call, isn't it, sir?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, I like to hear the sound of a human voice. . . .' He was going to say something else, but he stopped. The night operator fell to temptation; he reached for his tea and sipped it.

'Lonely—sir?' he said.

'No. Frightened.'

'What of?'

'The dark. I'm afraid of the dark.'

He put down the cup. He had known fear of many kinds, in many places. He was capable of acute fear while fielding at mid-on. 'Well, sir,' he said, looking apologetically down his nose into the mouthpiece. 'Surely there are people . . . I mean, it isn't usually very difficult to bump into people if you are that lonely. . . .'

'I avoid people.' The arrogance came back into the voice.

'But it seems to me,' said Mullins, respectfully enough, 'you've got to make your choice. Either to mix with people, or to be alone in the dark.' Damn nonsense this was, and irregular, holding deep confabs with callers in the middle of the night.

'Yes, yes, my man, choice is easy enough. When I say that I avoid people I do not imply that I am entirely without company. On the contrary I cultivate company, even as I avoid individuals.'

Mr. Mullins sipped his tea again. After all, it was Christmas time; he would not cut the gentleman off—for the moment. It was a good cup of tea, his second cup.

'Yes, I avoid individuals. To-night though, I was—I am to meet somebody. A thing I seldom do. Tell me, I hope I am not boring you?'

'Well, sir, I must point out that you're making the call; and you'll be charged, of course.' Difficult just to cut him off.

'If I am boring you I will tell you about my assignment. In the churchyard that lies outside Dunworthy on the other bank of the estuary—I forget its name—is buried a tall, sandy man, who always walked with a swagger, but who was modest—as modest and quiet living as anyone in the county. His name was John Dorn, and they said that I killed him—which was quite true. He died from drowning, though there were marks of a line on his throat. It might have been ship's tackle or something of that kind. . . .

'I was acquitted at the trial and it was generally agreed after that that he met his death accidentally. You may remember the case?'

'That's funny, I don't think I do remember.' Mr. Mullins eased his head-phones in order to scratch his head. 'Must have been while I was away at sea.' He felt a little indignant that he should have missed a local crime story. But what, in any case, was a fellow doing talking like this on the His Majesty's Post Office Telephone?

'You mean to say that you did him in, and you go about admitting it?'

The caller's voice had an edge like ice. The earphones upon Mr. Mullins's large red ears seemed to ache like cold draughts as he strained to catch every word. The night operator became a martyr to an undefined sense of duty, but curiosity and indecision kept him speechless.

'Well, well, my friend, there are times, of course, when one must talk—and you must let me tell you a little more.'

The voice gathered pace slightly, crouching into the mouth-piece. 'Some years ago—it was about this time of year—I realized that this modest, forthright spirit, John Dorn, was a man of pride, stubborn, human pride.

'Out here, in the harshness of this December weather, I asked his forgiveness for a wrong I had done—a mere matter of money relating to the farm. Less than a trifle it was to him, but to me whose heritage was being eaten by the sea, it was all that life held. Are you listening?'

'Why, yes, sir.' Mullins observed to himself that the voice was a little savage.

'Good. Then I am not alone. My brother (yes, he was my brother, and it was pride of blood that made him stand against me), my brother stood there holding the painter of his boat, and he smiled away into the rank mist that lay over the land that the sea had taken away from me.

"If I could feel that you have been honest, brother," he said, "my money should be yours, my whole land yours also for the taking. But you have been dishonest and a liar. And for that you shall rot for all I care. . . . Rot. . . . Unless you prove to me by coming here, to this spot, twelve months from now with certain proof that your name is cleared, my land and my goods shall never give you a moment's relief." And he spat into the salt mud which the sea had cast up upon my land. Are you listening?'

The night operator had cupped both hands over his headphones, pressing them down to hear the better. Something would have to be done. It was against all the regulations. It was an outrage.

'Yes,' he grunted. 'I'm listening.' And as he said it, he resolved on cunning action: he reached out with his right hand for Dunworthy Police Station. He began to ring. He waited ready.

'I killed him then easily, as he leaned over his boat, and the marks of the line about his neck were the marks of his own painter! I inherited. . . .'

Mullins depressed the speech key. The station sergeant answered furiously.

'Sergeant,' gasped Mullins, 'there is a murderer, a madman speaking here to Dunworthy telephone exchange. He is on another line, yes. No, I can't trace the call back because I'm here alone and the records are locked in the cupboard. You will come right away? Right.' He sighed. But it was his duty.

'Are you listening?'

'Yes, sir, yes—I heard what you said.' He allowed himself a tone of discretion.

'A twelve-month came and I was ready to prove my honesty, but he did not come. Another twelve-month. I am afraid of the dark, but I waited. Every year on the 24th

December I wait for my brother, John Dorn, because I know that he will come back . . . he will come back at. . . . Exchange, Exchange. I want the time. *The time!*

'Well, sir, I have already given it to you. The exchange clock is half-past . . .' Mullins got no further. Every hair of his body stood erect as he sat in the humdrum light of the exchange. Over the line the caller's voice changed to a thin scream:

'John Dorn! John Dorn! Take that rope from your neck! . . . take that rope! . . . that rope! . . . that rope!'

A gust of wind brought in the indignant sergeant.

'What's all this, Mr. Mullins? What's up?'

He upset his cold tea as he snatched off the head-phones. Nobody in Dunworthy had ever seen Mr. Mullins look like that. 'Hold on here, sergeant,' he said, 'when he speaks, say you are listening. I must trace it back. I must get the directory from the cupboard.' He leapt up.

'Dunworthy 13. Where is it? Can you hear anything, sergeant?'

'Nothing.' The sergeant was not appeased. He watched Mullins suspiciously.

'Dunworthy 13. Duncaister Manor! Why, that line's been "no subscriber" for years.'

'Duncaister Manor!' said the sergeant, 'why, that's the old place at Mud End that was washed away in the gale last year!'

Mr. Mullins looked very alarmed indeed. He crossed hurriedly and closed the door. Then he sat down again at the switchboard beside the sergeant, aware of all the unholy loneliness of the marsh which the sea was washing away.

'You've been talking on a dead line, Mr. Mullins,' observed the sergeant, putting down the head-phones.

'*A dead line.*' Mr. Mullins trembled from head to foot.

If Somebody is Brave

THE DOOR shut for the seventh time. They stood up to look; and the man before them said: 'I am Number Seven, the last, they say.' The walls of their prison then closed about them; and they, the seven hostages, were united in tragic irrelevance, a symbol within the pattern of blood. 'They have given each of us a number. Do you think it means anything?'

'God knows. I lose track of all meaning.'

'The Enemy is shrewd, though.'

'The Enemy is also stupid, my friend.'

'We must be careful what we say, I suppose.'

'We are past being careful. In our position. . . .'

'We are all in the same boat, obviously.'

'Though we are numbers, we stand for something.'

As the walls of their prison closed about them, they used the word 'we' in a ritual, incorporating themselves. They looked one another over, identifying themselves. There was no obvious leader, no one who spoke first. They were all talking together. The calamity had fallen upon all. They had not been selected. They were seven men who happened to be at the railway station at the moment when the Enemy desired to select seven hostages. They shared the chance of having been there for one purpose or other at noon: they shared that misfortune. A bomb might have killed such a fortuitous gathering: that was the chance of war. A storm of rain might have made them seriously wet: that was the chance of season. It happened that they chanced to live, that their span of life chanced to become symbolic, the congregation of them

there a component of the Enemy's power. 'One of the Enemy had been killed.'

'Some scum, no doubt, some guttersnipe who got knifed in the red light district. . . .'

'One of those who deserve to die. . . .'

'Shush! You never know.'

'What can it matter: now that we are here? They all deserve to die.'

'Those who touch our women do.'

'But this one—the one we are here for—shall we hear who he was, do you suppose?'

'It might be a convenience to know for whom one is dying.'

'*You all accept dying!* You talk of it like sheep!' This speaker was Number Seven, the last one, with a voice so intense that he silenced the room. He stood by the door still. He had not spoken. He had looked from one to the other as if he had expected help. One by one they had resolved not to meet his eyes. For those were animal eyes, trapped, frightened, unresolved. Seven was dangerous because he looked as they all feared to look. Seven was unable to accept the walls. His brown skin was freckled with panic. 'Are you going to accept death? Because'—he looked slowly from one to another, forcing the intimacy of his eyes upon them—'because I can't accept death.' His voice was the warm resonant half-whisper of a man making love. One by one, each of them had the shock of the eyes of this Number Seven. Each saw there the panic of unresolve. Each, at this of all moments, wished to escape them. There was silence: and then Number Seven advanced towards the group of them.

He was young. There was the bloom upon him. He was loose of limb, of medium height, a gay fellow perhaps who came from the valleys in the mountain provinces. His blue eyes surprised you, in their setting of dark skin. He was a fine strain of the manhood of our country. Had he carried in

his strong hands the whips and rubber bruisers of the Enemy he could not have stricken more wholly the six men who waited in silence.

'I do not want to die,' he said. 'Because my missus is going to have a baby. I have two sons already and this is to be a little girl. If I die the missus will be alone. Think of it! Alone with the two little boys, becoming helpless, with nobody to fetch in the water, or bring vegetables or do a bit of cooking. Bolting the door, alone at night and sleeping badly—she doesn't sleep well because of her size—listening in case the boys wake up and waiting, wondering if its a girl, always waiting.'

They might avoid his eyes in the prison room but that tenderness of voice sought them in those confines of themselves which they had hoped to bolt and bar against intrusion.

'We are married men, most of us, I expect.'

'Or we have home ties at least.'

'Families, wives or sweethearts. Who hasn't?'

Number Seven smiled his douce smile and said: 'But, you see, we had it all before us. Only last night we were talking . . . only last night after my missus had made coffee and we turned the radio down, not right down because it was the waltz programme we both love. . . .'

Several of the six men moved. Last night they too had listened to the radio, last night there had been coffee in their homes. 'We talked,' said Number Seven, 'while they played the waltzes, about the future. For, say what you like, there is a future. My missus put her feet up, and we wondered what we would call our daughter. It will be a daughter, this time. Should we call her after my wife's mother, my mother or after my sister perhaps? I looked across at my wife—she is dark with blue eyes and she comes from a little way up in the mountains—and there she sits with that sweet, silly curve of her belly. But now, to-night, she is alone. She is waiting

not just for her child, but for me. We are in love. I know her thoughts. I have been away before when I was in the army. She knows my thoughts. She knows that I do not want to die. I am young. I feel her thought in every bone of my body. To you I am just Number Seven: but let me tell you I am a man. I am . . .'

'You have said enough, Number Seven. We are men. There is nothing to say and you have said too much. You will weaken us. If we wished, we might all talk as you have talked.'

'You are old: and the old will always talk,' Seven said, throwing back his fine head. 'In my time the old have talked too much.'

The older men stood up. 'I am Number Five. I am fifty-seven years old. I am too old to fight but I am young enough to suffer because I understand the degrees of suffering. I listened to you. You caused me suffering. You are sincere without doubt. You are honest, my friend. But I do not intend to hear another word from you.'

There was silence again and a clock outside struck. It was supper time. This Number Five was a business man, a creature of habit. He glanced at his watch and noted that the last evening train was gone. Then a softness came upon him and he spoke to Number Seven. 'I was never young like you. I never went courting in the mountains. I never saw my young wife grow big. I lived according to my means. I grew old according to my means.'

Number Three stood by and sighed. (Do you wear false teeth when they kill you? What does one do with teeth? Would it be possible, I wonder, to take them out and slip them into one's pocket. But then when they go through your pockets. Do they? They must do. The Enemy is thorough. So they would find my teeth in my pocket. Which pocket? Not a trouser pocket: that would be absurd. In the jacket

pocket along with cigarettes and matches and things. That would be messy. Do they kill you in your teeth?) Number Three sighed: 'I suppose they kill us in all our clothes?' he said.

'The Enemy is thrifty,' murmured Number Five. 'I have done business with the Enemy for years—before all this happened, of course. There is such a shortage of clothes nowadays that . . .'

'But, my God, what about one's dignity?' Number Three said.

'Dignity?' Number Five laughed his business man's deprecating laugh. 'We sold out on that long ago.'

'You may have sold the things in the shop window, my dear sir. You may even have been twisted out of the things on your shelves. You may have sacked your staff, because they were too young and enterprising but you are left a man with a name. . . .'

'With a Number,' sniffed the business man.

'A man then,' Number Three said. 'And what, when he comes to be killed, is a man to do with his false teeth?'

Several of the men laughed, as they were probably meant to. Number Three glanced towards them appreciatively as he produced a silk handkerchief and wiped the spectacles which he very seldom seemed to put on. Certainly he carried a measure of dignity. But a certain comic self-appraisal turned his demeanour into a joke: for the words he spoke and his shrill accentuation of the language were absurd trimmings to the dignity of his person. Numbers One and Two had gone so far as to address him as 'Sir': but they were also the first to laugh helplessly over the problem of the teeth.

'I am not ashamed,' said Number Three, 'of embarrassing you by talking about my false teeth. They are going to be among the least of our embarrassments. For instance, I see no chance of privacy'—he glanced at the closet in an alcove

—‘in anything. And for one who has never so much as combed his hair in public that is an ordeal which must be faced with all the qualities of our national pride.’

Number Three then unbuttoned himself with ponderous and careful movements, paused to bring out his spectacles, adjusted them to rest near the bottom of his nose and prepared to ease himself at the closet. His pink striped shirt-tails and his blue lustre under-pants parted and his large well nourished body was revealed. No actress ever took the stage with a neater display of modest aplomb.

Then the door was thrown open for the first time since the arrival of Number Seven—as if the Enemy had been watching for Number Three to settle. ‘Attention!’ bawled the Enemy Sergeant marching three steps forward from the doorway. With a wavering movement the men stood up. ‘You will stand at attention in the military style whenever your door is opened. Attention!’ bawled the Sergeant. ‘And you. Attention!’ he added half turning to Number Three.

‘But, Sergeant, as you see I am improperly dressed for a military exercise,’ squeaked Number Three.

‘Get up. Stand at attention or . . .’

‘If I am to demonstrate the modern violation of the rights of man . . .’ Number Three began.

‘Silence. Attention!’

Number Three rose. The pink striped shirt tails fluttered for a moment: then they were still.

It was one of those interminable routine inspections of the Enemy. Afterwards, as the light began to fail, they found places for themselves on the mattresses against the walls. Numbers One and Two spoke in low voices helping each other to settle like two old soldiers. Number Seven threw himself down and lay intently watching the light drain the flat realities from his family photograph. Number Three combed his hair before a hand mirror: and Number Five

checking his watch by every quarter chime of the clock, behaved like a man at the railway station where his life had left off, his business anxieties unfulfilled.

All that they had learnt was that they were there because one of the Enemy had been killed and that they were expected to stand to attention whenever the door opened. They suspected that they would soon die.

It became noticeable in time that Number Seven was moving slightly, rhythmically. He was sobbing. Again he magnetized them, sharing that which they did not wish but must accept. 'Number Seven ought to be comforted,' said Number Three, still combing his ageing hair though it was too dark to see in the mirror. 'And there is no comfort, not even a message of glamour. We are in a false position, becoming martyrs when all we expected was to do something at the railway station. We cannot be dignified clearly because we hardly know why we are here or what is expected of us: but at least we ought to be sustained by the glamour of the thing. After all, we represent our country; we are living history.'

'I would rather represent my country in almost any way than by dying. One could be so much more productive. It is so wasteful—one almost might say uneconomic—to shut us up quite aimlessly and kill us. Even the Enemy whom I have always found to be shrewd in business' (for it was Number Five speaking of course), 'must see how absurd it is, even ruling out moral values.'

'Gentlemen, we are not giving any comfort to Number Seven, who cries for his wife, nor are we organizing what little resources we have.' Number Six used an energetic voice with more than a tinge of impatience. Except to smile pleasantly and to answer, if directly spoken to, this Number Six had remained preoccupied. 'For Number Seven, you are quite right, there is no comfort. There is no comfort for the

body that yearns and mourns. That discomfort most of us share. You are also right when you say there is no glamour, no reason, no dignity, even no hope. These qualities can only be deserved and made. We must regard ourselves objectively—as a problem, if you like, removed from the realities of our everyday life. I am accustomed to blue prints. Allow me to suggest that we map out our resources.'

'Our resources?' said Number Five. 'We are bankrupt.'

'Not while a man cries for his wife. Not while a man sickens with worry about his teeth. Not while our friends here, One and Two, settle themselves against a wall as if they are encamping for life.'

Number Seven disliked these words, for his sobs ceased and he stood up. 'You talk as if there was hope, a way out, a way home,' he said.

'Shush!' Number Five said, edging away from that hurtful eagerness with a business man's prudence.

'Who is listening? Who can be bothered to listen to condemned men? That is the damnable part; nobody will want to listen or hear. We are here to be killed, out of hand, like so many trees felled in the autumn in our mountains to make a quota. But,' said Number Seven, with the sudden softness of a child, 'you talked of there being some hope?'

'You spoke of hope, not me,' said Number Six. 'I don't think the Enemy is likely to offer us any. By being hostages we have become part of his organization in which everybody has a function. Our function is to be killed. We are digits in his calculations. From time to time his calculations are changed and every now and then his organization is put out. Being inflexible by nature, the organization is vulnerable.'

'Now you are talking propaganda. In a minute,' said Number Three, 'you will tell us about the Enemy being short of oil.'

'Propaganda is an exercise which has always been outside

my orbit. I deal with facts or plans, not threats or promises.'

'But you said about the Enemy being vulnerable,' said Number Three huffily. 'Whereas look at us. We are naked, and, speaking for myself, thoroughly ashamed.'

Number Six listened and probably smiled his neat smile in the dark. 'Our first resource,' he said, 'is our common experience. If we share discomfort, loss of dignity or what you will, we also share courage, intelligence, sympathy, and our hostility to the enemy. . . .'

'Shush!' Number Five whispered. 'It is so unwise to talk like that. . . .'

But Number Seven spoke eagerly, with that warmth of his, from the darkness. 'He is talking sense, this Number Six, let him go on. It helps if somebody is brave.'

'Our strength then is in our ability to communicate with each other,' Number Six continued. 'Since we represent a factor of the Enemy's government of our country, a symbol, as some rightly suggest, we must conserve our small strength by unison. I apologize for stating it rather pompously, but I will also be practical and suggest means.' His voice dropped. He spoke with quiet emphasis and the men gathered round him. 'We may not be able to speak to each other. They often make a rule of silence. In that case, speak with your hands. Use this for your identity.' One by one he touched them. 'That signal can be made either visually or by tapping. Then use this for . . .'

The silence was threaded with their whispers. Their eyes strained in the dark darkly binding them into a pattern one with another. Their hands sought one another and it seemed at last as if the prison incorporated them. They were not dominated by Number Six. His bravery, the practical pulse of courage, was now shared. From time to time, if Number Seven seemed to weaken, the unison of their strength flowed towards him and silenced him in the dark.

Whether they slept or not they hardly knew when, before dawn, they were paraded before the Enemy Commandant who was in charge of their death. Their unison was shaken only once before they were shot in the quarry at daybreak. To make a final assessment of them the Commandant inspected them individually. When he came to Number Seven he smiled briefly and said. 'Right: you may go now.'

Number Seven moved lithely away into the pallor of the morning, smiling perhaps, but never turning to the others. The Commandant moved on down the line. The line shuddered: but recovered as the sustenance of the six men returned, closing over them like the surface of calm waters.

Chance of a Lifetime

MR. DAMSON was called Plum by his cronies to his face, by everyone behind his back. Only his sisters called him Rufus.

Rufus he was christened. We once took the trouble to look it up in the register in Sisterley Church, as a result of some bet or other. Rufus Damson, it said, first son of Samuel Damson, baker. We made a note of the date at the time: and rummaged for the ages of the Damson girls. Plum was upset about this when he found out—and he heard about it soon enough, you may be sure.

You need not be a baker to hear all that people are doing in Sisterley, but if you happen to be, with a shop opposite the Eagle and a tendency to gossip over a pint, you hear every detail as soon as it happens and sometimes even when it does not.

If, like Plum, you have a leaning towards a sporting view of life, it may lead to a variety of wagers and side-bets. In Sisterley we rather pride ourselves on our sportsmanship. It is nothing to be ashamed of; as Plum himself used to say, it shows a place is in a good way of business.

But Plum was sensitive about his sisters. Alice did for him in the house and helped in the shop. Phyllis did the books and worked part-time at typewriting for Mr. Love, the auctioneer. Muriel taught the pianoforte and took in dress-making. They brought in just enough each, only just.

It was an odd assortment of talent, but Plum said it was the best that could be done in a place like Sisterley, and he was content, so long as they earned their keep until they

married. Marriage would give them a real job, he used to say with a laugh, and take them off his hands.

I happen to know that he lost money over this. He was in the habit of laying bets with his own little circle, as to how long the girls would remain single. He had to pay out, of course, every Christmas, just about the time he held his cake raffle.

Few of us in Sisterley missed Plum's Christmas raffles. The enormous three-tiered sugary cake illuminated one's heart. No cake of that size was visible at any other time of year, no cake of that size was ever contemplated even at an Easter Monday wedding. What excitement the winning of it caused, what side-bets were made in the Eagle against probable winners!

For it must be admitted that the winners were never improbable. It was an annual feat of imagination on the part of Mr. Damson; though imagination boggled at some people.

The new bank clerk, for instance, newly arrived from the North and for ever talking about it, fat Mrs. Caulk who gave lectures to the Women's Institute on breadmaking, the manager of the only multiple grocery store who looked all ways at once and kept twitching, nicely spoken Miss Garth from the dogs' home, all these were out of the question.

They could pay their sixpences and hope for that snowy treasure of a cake: but their chances, if they but knew it, were not those of a day-old chick in a snowstorm.

Plum saw that the cake went to such as would appreciate it.

He fancied a deserving winner, nevertheless, unlikely enough to appeal to one's sporting instincts, but healthy enough in capacity to demolish the cake with decent appetite.

For the sake of appearances Plum himself would be willing to lose a bob or two by joining in the betting. But most of us made no secret of the fact that we were betting on Plum's choice.

Mrs. Winnart was the last to win the cake; and I am glad to say I did well out of it with a shilling at ten to one. I had noticed that Ted Winnart, though only just nineteen, had shown very kindly attention to Phyllis Damson at the Police Dance, and that was good enough for me.

But no sooner was Christmas over, than Ted seemed less strong about Phyllis and people laughed because they said it was indigestion from the cake.

'There's nothing,' Plum said, 'as exasperates me so much as the clack of women.'

'You'd better get married, Plum, and cure yourself,' said Corky Legg.

'Time there was a marriage over your place,' somebody put in, hoping to draw him.

'I'd say it was time,' said Plum fiercely. 'With nothing but the clack of women morning, noon and night. It's too much for one, that's what it is. Nobody can work with it all on his hands.'

'Well,' said Corky, always one for a joke, 'raffle 'em, Plum. There's plenty of young fellows comes in here could do with one of 'em.'

'Go on, Plum, be a sport,' we all said. 'Enter one of 'em as a prize for the Grand National Sweep.'

Everybody laughed: but Plum looked serious. There was something on his mind still. 'Be damned if I don't raffle one of 'em, before long . . .' he muttered.

The trouble on his mind was Muriel, the musical one. Her pianoforte lessons brought in regular money, or he would have found a way of stopping her before; because he was not musical himself and the noise she made, teaching and practising, gave him what he called mental rheumatism.

Muriel used the piano in the parlour, next to the office and the bakehouse. The only way Plum could stop the vibrations in his head, when they came on bad, was to go and dress the

window. It led to his always winning the window dressing competitions in Sisterley.

Since the Police Dance, the mental rheumatism had been much worse.

Muriel was not good looking because of her squint and the just noticeable way she grew a moustache: but she happened to stumble against a young man in the Paul Jones who squinted too and favoured a dancing style of mournful abandon. Muriel followed the grotesque lunges and the hesitant shimmies of this young man: and when he told her that he played the ukelele she told him about her piano.

They sat on a sofa in the passage; and she said: 'I don't often meet musicians. Do you know anything by Chopin?'

'No,' he said. 'I do hot stuff on my uke.'

'Hot stuff?'

'Jazz. Nobody does the Chopin stuff nowadays. It is not commercial.'

They sat on the sofa, and, while the band played, he talked about swing. Muriel listened; she had thought about swing as something remotely wicked. She enjoyed dancing, but she didn't connect it with her piano, her lessons to the doctor's children, to Mrs. Caulk's ageing daughter and to the hair-dresser's only son who was receiving education in all the arts.

The young man briefly explained that he was a waiter at the Duncaister Arms Hotel, over on the main road, and therefore lived in the thick of things. He would lend her some sheets of music left by the band which played in the summer. If she cared for them enough to practise, he would combine forces with her on his evening off and they would syncopate together.

So Muriel began playing a number called 'Yellow Blues' over Christmas: and the evening Plum felt so cross about women she had started 'Yom-Yom.' Her persistence in the face of all opposition and the difficulties in mastering hot music combined to make the parlour uninhabitable, even as

it seemed to make sour the very bread supplied by Damson and Son.

Every moment she could snatch from her dressmaking she spent syncopating. When Plum complained, Alice came out on Muriel's side, said she liked a bit of rhythm and that it was sometimes as good as the wireless.

'You wait till you hear me do it with the uke,' added Muriel.

'You wouldn't have thought it of Muriel, would you?' said Phyllis, the steady one, approvingly.

You wouldn't.

To see her, ample and slightly moustached, heavy-handed and persistent, earnest and implacably roused, you would have found it difficult to believe. For years there had been nothing remarkable in the house but expectancy, sometimes jaded, but always generating a faint illumination like an oil stove. For years Plum had remarked on the fact that three women in a house were out of proportion, but that sooner or later God would provide.

Now, the remarkable thing in the house was the clumsy, strident, rhythmical fingering of Muriel as she attempted the tune 'Yom-Yom.'

'All right,' said Plum when we reminded him about the raffle. 'If something don't happen before the Grand National we'll have an Easter raffle—just among the gents—for my sister Muriel. She's a rare one for the piano, and she's just took up with jazz. That's not at all a bad thing for them as likes it.'

There was the excitement of the Grand National first. Corky Legg had once been to Aintree when he was in service as a chauffeur, and we listened, as ever, to his account of the hazards of the course. We followed round every likely runner mentally: and Plum brought out his form book to check their possibilities.

Nevertheless, it was not difficult to see that anxiety about

Muriel was taking the edge off his judgment. He was cantankerous and illogical in his selections. Muriel's hot rhythm was dissipating his powers.

These were wide windy days, loud, intemperate yet sunny. Courting couples braved the boisterous secrecy of Sisterley woods on Sunday afternoons; and were seen in the evenings passing under the seven street lamps towards the draughty darkness of Station Lane. Muriel and her sisters entertained Joe Bassano, the squinting performer on the ukulele, as if he were an Eastern prince. 'Yom-Yom' was played, and so was the 'Yellow Blues.'

Plum, heavy with Sunday roast, fixedly stared at the polished black bob of the waiter's head, at the tap-tapping of his brown and white pointed shoes.

He suspected the man, but his suspicion was three to one against: and he held his peace in the shrill room.

He had had the good sense to discover the man's earnings, however: they were paltry enough to rule him out from anything serious. A Damson did not go to any here-to-day-gone-to-morrow young Jack, particularly one with a foreign name. No; a straightforward little gamble among sportsmen appealed to him. That was a game a foreigner would never understand. That was more like Sisterley.

So it was probably more than chance which caused Plum to instigate our sweepstake on the Grand National that year. He seemed in a hurry about it, too: for, as a rule, we were content to leave it till a day or two before the race. We guessed he was up to something, and we were not surprised when he called a little private meeting some time before the race.

'Time's come,' he said, 'for doing something about these girls.'

'Well,' said Corky. 'There's your Muriel you said you would put in a raffle; and there's more than one single man

as would not mind spending a few bob, Mr. Damson, if you're going to do the right thing by her.'

Plum threw out his chest and wiped flour out of his eyebrows in his most dignified manner. 'There is no question, gents, but that Muriel will be properly provisioned by me. The Damsons are not here-to-day-gone-to-morrow folk.'

Everybody murmured approval to this; and Corky, who had had an eye on Muriel for a long time, looked particularly pleased.

'There's no need for me to say, gents, that we'll keep the little gamble that I'm going to suggest strictly to ourselves,' Plum went on. 'There's outsiders and foreigners that would give their souls—and they've got nothing else to give—to be in on this.' We agreed again. You've got to be a Sisterley man to be a proper sport.

Plum explained that he was putting Muriel up as first prize. A fine strapping girl, he said, was worth more than money can buy, but when the lucky winner would inherit a very decent little dowry and his own good will, there need be no hesitation among bachelors of a sporting nature.

Muriel, he said, was a willing girl; there need be no doubt concerning her acceptance of the fortunate man. He proposed to offer tickets at two shillings apiece, limited to buyers who were eligible in a proper legal sense.

'Here's my two bob,' declared Corky Legg, 'for a start. I take it that my slight disability is no objection.'

He was referring, of course, to his being one-legged, a fact which had limited his wooing of any of the Damson girls hitherto.

'We don't mind a one-legged 'un,' said Plum, amiably enough. 'All's fair in love or war, me hearties. I'm offering a sporting chance all round.'

Corky Legg banged down his florin and asked for seven, his lucky number.

'Corky's taking no chances,' everyone said.

Muriel and her sisters enjoyed their first rhythm party—as they called it—so much that they entertained Bassano again that evening. He and Muriel learnt an old sentimental number, a favourite at all Sisterley dances, 'If you were the only girl in the world.' It needed hotting up, of course, but clever work of the uke soon put that right.

Alice and Phyllis were so taken with it that when Joe suggested their singing the words they said they didn't mind if they did.

Between them they made a rare noise, 'like a choir practice before Christmas,' said Plum, 'only worse.' It kept him out of the house throughout that evening; and it wasn't long before his tickets were sold out.

'Ever have a plunge on the horses?' said Joe Bassano to the girls during supper.

'Rufus does,' said Muriel. 'We leave that sort of thing to him. He's very knowing. . . .'

'What about a little splash on your own?'

'Oh, I wouldn't bet, not me, Mr. Bassano.' Muriel going coy was the signal for general laughter, a cause and effect which never varied.

'Now look here,' said Joe, that cunning rogue. 'You know it's the National soon?'

They knew. They were Sisterley girls.

'Well, I got a ticket in the big sweep—course a lot of our customers has them as a regular thing. Here she is, a beauty.' Proudly he showed them the magic token, the ticket to infinite leisure, infinite happiness, to all the exaltation of the life of this world. It showed how he lived in the thick of things, to produce such a ticket from his pocket. 'Tell you what,' he said, 'you can all take shares in it. I'll let you have one half.'

The Damson girls were delighted by this and flattered; but an implicit loyalty moved Alice and Phyllis to deny themselves

the treat. Muriel, they said, ought to have the half ticket, for Muriel's talents, they thought to themselves, had attracted this man of the world to cold supper in their parlour behind the shop.

Joe Bassano seemed very glad of the money when Muriel fetched it from upstairs. From what Plum had heard of him, that was not surprising either. He needed some of it, to begin with, for his bus ticket back to the hotel. The early spring was not a good season for tips; and Plum had been told that the unfortunate fellow depended for his living on tips.

So Muriel bought the half share and took a receipt saying: 'Miss M. Damson has a half share in ticket number so-and-so . . .' and Joe Bassano finished his evening by crying 'hotcha' to the wild thrumming of his ukulele and hearing none of the rumours about Plum's sweepstake which rustled through Sisterley.

Nothing was said openly, of course. The rumours remained rumours: and those of us in the know concealed our excitement as best we could.

Plum was delighted with the atmosphere of sporting enthusiasm. It said a lot, he said, for the character of Sisterley lads. People might talk as they pleased. He was doing the right thing by his sister Muriel; and if he could not do it in the sporting manner he chose, there was no freedom of sportsmanship left in the world.

The draw took place. There were just enough horses to go round: and it was thought that Corky, whose chances were good, would probably draw 'Rosette,' the favourite.

'All's fair in love, war and horse-racing,' said Plum, adapting his favourite proverb to the moment; and poor Corky drew 'Dangerous Corner,' the rankest outsider. His chances of winning Muriel with that horse were, in fact, a joke, and we all laughed until Corky was quite savage.

He himself would not have had any faith in the horse,

though usually he had a weakness for outsiders in the Grand National, for no sooner did he realize that we were all laughing than he slunk off and pushed his way, without knocking properly, into the parlour where Muriel was practising at the piano.

In despair he stammered out that he had come to lay his heart at her feet. Would she take him or leave him. His only hope in the world was to win her by this entreaty.

'What about the sweepstake?' Muriel replied coldly. Plum had discussed it with the girls just before the draw; he was afraid they might have been alarmed by the rumours.

'The sweep?' Corky looked ashamed. It was the sweepstake he wanted to avoid, to circumvent and to outwit.

'You must have drawn a horse, if you went in for it,' said Muriel remorselessly disregarding his feelings.

'Yes, Miss Damson, I drew an outsider. You may know it, "Dangerous Corner," it's called.'

'But it might . . .'

'Anything might happen on that course at Aintree,' said Corky earnestly, 'but can't we make it a cert, Miss Damson?'

'There is no such thing as a cert, Mr. Legg, so far as I am concerned.'

It was clear that she abided by Plum's arrangements for her future, but that she was following the whole matter with interest. 'And how much, Mr. Legg, may I ask, did the ticket cost you?'

'Two shillings,' said Corky, think of a hundred better chances he could have had for the money.

'Then I've a proposition to make, Mr. Legg,' she said, unbending for the first time, and licking her slight moustache. 'I daresay you could do with a half share in a ticket for the big sweep? They take some getting, don't they? I don't know of anybody in Sisterley that has ever had one except the bank manager.'

Corky stood very still, and allowed desire for the ticket to take possession of him. 'And what would half a share in the ticket be worth, Miss Damson?'

'Ten shillings, it's worth, but . . .'

Corky Legg was already fumbling with his wallet. Here was a chance worth having, the chance of a lifetime.

'I will exchange it for your two shilling ticket, Mr. Legg, and call it quits.'

'Quits?' Corky's eyes danced over the stolid girl on the piano stool. A half-share in a ticket in the big sweep was a prize in itself. It would bring a joyous exhilaration to the days before the draw, an exhilaration every sportsman would envy. Whereas the two-bobsworth, well . . .

'Course, it means giving up my chance, Miss Damson.'

She looked at him steadily and not very kindly.

'But you're getting the chance of a lifetime.'

He nodded. If she wanted a chance in her own stakes it was her own affair. He handed over his interest in the outsider 'Dangerous Corner,' and that very evening they say she gave the youngest Winnart boy sixpence to take it up to Joe Bassano at the hotel in an envelope.

Nobody gave a thought, except out of politeness to Corky, to that outsider 'Dangerous Corner,' till a telegram came to the post office for Joe Bassano, saying he had drawn it in the Big Sweep. The news spread through Sisterley at once, and we cheered the telegraph boy as he rode past the Eagle waving the message.

Questions were asked on all sides as to how Corky came to own a half-share in the ticket, but he was too sick to be able to answer, fortunately; and Plum was the first to say that it must have been a real sporting Fate which had brought him two such chances as Muriel and a fortune with the same horse.

Sisterley held its breath during the Grand National. Those

who could concentrate on business sufficiently closed their shops and offices. Others left them open and empty while they listened to the radio. There was not a soul in the place that had not followed Corky's luck by backing the outsider 'Dangerous Corner.'

When he won, there was pandemonium enough to be heard in all the four parishes, though the vicar has never forgiven some of us for the ringing of the church bells.

The full implication of the event hit Plum suddenly when Joe Bassano drove up in a hired car in his waiter's clothes waving his ukulele and calling him brother.

Plum denounced him as a cheat at first. Rich or poor, he was not the man for a Damson. But when Joe showed him the winning ticket, in the momentary secrecy of the parlour, and said how awkward it would be if Plum's sweepstake became the talk of the countryside, he had to look pleased.

When he came out, followed by the lucky pair, he assured the crowd that they had been engaged for some time and that he was very glad to have such a sportsman in the Damson family.

He will go so far in self-deception nowadays as to hold up Mr. and Mrs. Joe Bassano, proprietors of the Duncaister Arms Hotel, as an example to the whole world of the good clean spirit of Sisterley sportsmanship; but when he tries to bring himself to be civil to the wealthiest man in Sisterley, Corky Legg, he fails.

Her Pointed Teeth

WHEN WE were there as children we used to tell each other that Lady Cyprass had pointed teeth. We feared her silken rustle and her elegant bony touch. We shuddered at her young-old face brightly enamelled when she looked down upon us and growled benevolently.

Her grounds at Wisteria House which spread out beneath Hanging Cliff, shrouded in shrubbery-shadow and often in sea mist, were a half discovered and dangerous paradise, to which sometimes we gained brief admittance. That jungle began at the tram-lines on the Promenade and ended at the very cliff base whence even the trams were almost inaudible. And there, beneath an ivied archway, was the foot of that almost fabulous staircase known as the Cliff Girdle which wound right across the green white surface of Hanging Cliff itself.

Nobody had been known to ascend it: but from time to time Lady Cyprass might be seen letting herself through the locked wicket gate at the top (near the Trafalgar Terrace which is now a fun fair) in order to make a slow graceful descent. Usually she was alone.

When we were grown up we heard more and more—but never quite enough—about Lady Cyprass. Instead of being sympathetic towards an old lady we were always put on our mettle a little when the brightly enamelled young-old face addressed us; for her tongue was barbed, her mind was cunning in worldly knowledge, and her eye let nothing pass. That she was of the Stage, that she had been a familiar of

monarchs, that she had entertained every notoriety and wit, that legendary figures had followed one another down the Cliff Girdle, we learnt gradually. There were old affairs, old scores, old friendships laid away in the shady fragrances of Wisteria House. There were old friends who still visited, who were served with wines from the ample cellars, who sported around the piano in the salon with the signed photographs, who spent mornings in the library over anecdotes and signed first editions. There were also pilgrims who came from great distances and from far countries: sometimes these were the children or grandchildren of those who had known Lady Cyprass in other days.

The appearance of Wisteria House changed little. Only the jungle became thicker and her Ladyship's cats sleeker and more sagacious. Then there was the gale they said was the worst for twenty years: and the amazing downfall of rock which carried away quite a few yards of the Cliff Girdle stairs leaving a gap which came out quite clearly in local press photographs taken from the Promenade—after her Ladyship had driven the Press out of the grounds with her long umbrella.

She had repairs put in hand quite abruptly after a year or two. Many said it was an absurd expense. Bert Harrison, who was given the job, shook his head over it, and said repeatedly that it would take time and money, half hoping that her Ladyship would throw up the idea. For the stairs could be of little use to an old lady and they were unsafe for any general use. Lady Cyprass said brusquely: 'Take your time, Harrison, as you always do over everything, but I want it done.'

While Bert's men were hoisted gingerly up and down the cliff-face in a cradle that summer, they overlooked the customary summer parties. The usual distinguished people and the usual pilgrims came to Wisteria House. The workmen

recognized a former statesman, a famous General of an historic campaign, a film star whom the whole town would have paid pounds to see. . . .

Dinner was the climax of each day. The late sun gilded the blinds: there was much laughter over cocktails. Then Lady Cyprass made a stately entry and a lingering talkative dinner ensued. By that time of day guests began to know each other, by half-way through dinner they had become intimates, by the time they drank the health of Lady Cyprass they had been drawn into each other's secrets, hopes, and disillusionments. No doubt these devil's breakfasts would have shocked the local worthies: there were many children no doubt who still believed in Lady Cyprass's sharp pointed teeth. More than one pilgrim had sworn before to repeat what he had seen and heard before passing out. Pilgrims often passed out at an early stage if they were young in years or tender with illusions.

Upon the evening I have in mind a dainty individual, fragile as china, with silky grey hair, with a face printed upon parchment, arrived later than he had been bid. It was almost the late summer dusk and the evening drinks were well forward when he entered the house, changed hurriedly and was subjected to a fierce upbraiding by her Ladyship. He appeared smiling and crestfallen amid the company whose obligation it was to introduce each other. On his entering, however, an ex-ambassador rose and addressed him with respectful familiarity and said: 'You of all people, Edmund Gerard!—though one must never be surprised whom one meets *chez La Cyprass*—You, it was catching the evil eye for joining us so late. One would have thought you mountaineers would be forgiven for singular manners. . . .'

Did His Excellency speak too cordially, with a double edge to his fine words implying more than a passing knowledge and perhaps dislike, of the world-famous climber, Edmund

Gerard? The company wondered and looked forward to the evening to judge. Such decisions were part of the evening's relish.

Throughout dinner there were toasts to this peak and to that summit, to pioneers and explorers: and Lady Cyprass growled their Christian names: and the former ambassador looked upon Gerard with increasing reverence. It was Lady Cyprass who egged on the little man to ascend from the top of the bookcase to the picture rail. He was hilariously applauded as he edged his way round the room. It was Lady Cyprass who suggested that he should scale the Cliff Girdle at sunrise, but many of the others warned him that the gap was wide and treacherous. Distinctly they heard her growl: 'Men I have known do not generally lose their strength as well as their wits.'

'Their wits—never,' they cried, drinking her health. 'But their strength drains away with age, worse luck,' added an old General.

Into the small hours they talked of their prowess in former days and of beauties that were. Their voices mellowed and became young in the lamplight: and the pilgrim who had travelled across Europe on the recommendation of his distinguished grandfather, the Prince, curled up like a puppy and knew no more.

He dreamed though. He dreamed that the age-old youthful face of Lady Cyprass leant over him and showed her pointed teeth: and he dreamed that afterwards as the company drifted off he saw her goading and sneering at Gerard the famous mountaineer.

The sea was sparkling and the first trams were passing when Bert Harrison and the foreman were lowered cautiously in the builder's cradle down the face of Hanging Cliff. Bert made his inspection every other day, to set an example to his men and to prove to himself how the mending of the stair would take even longer and cost even more than he had first

suggested. Though the cradle and tackle were absolutely safe, the men at the top guessed there was trouble from the hollering, the straining, and the oath-embellished directions first to anchor the pulley, then to lower away gently, gently, to the jungle beneath.

For Bert and his foreman suddenly saw, as they were lighting cigarettes during the descent, a small black figure solitary and still as a fly on the sheer empty cliff in the midst of the stair gap just beneath them. At first they thought it was a corpse, 'a suicide in evening dress that had got caught.'

But the upright figure was not caught upon anything. Rigid and muscle-bound, it was supported by nothing,

They were lowered just clear. Bert, by bellowing and grasping the guy-ropes from the balustrades and manœuvring in and beneath the corpse, when there was a lurch. The black figure shot out a leg, swung expertly on the cradle bar and dropped backwards on to the cradle floor. An expiring rattling sound came from the parchment grey face and the little body in dress clothes crumpled into a heap.

Before the procession was half-way through the jungle, the grandson of the Prince, the awakened pilgrim, ran out on to the promenade and we led him to a telephone (for neither telephone nor electricity were ever connected to Wisteria House). Before a doctor could arrive a small crowd of us went back with the young man and helped Bert and the foreman who were trembling and light-headed. We carried their burden up to the verandah.

The blind of the French window went up and Lady Cyprass stood there in her long violet gown. She looked down briefly and began to laugh. She threw back her head laughing as she reached to pull down the blind again.

We saw then that she had pointed teeth.

The young man, the pilgrim, came with us to have a cup of tea and three aspirins. He wept and shivered and told us his tale. We never, of course, saw him again.

Uncle Arthur

'OH, MOTHER, Mother! Look at the elephant coming down the garden,' cried Lily. Her mother was thinking just then, however, and disregarded Lily's remark. Her mother was thinking about possessions.

So Lily ran and opened the front door, ready to let the elephant in. She was thrilled at the unusual visitor; though, judging by her mother's reticence, she should not have shown excitement. She had rarely seen elephants. Though she was receiving a normal education, regular nourishment, and a proper home environment, her opportunities of seeing them were almost negligible.

Something had happened at last: she had always known that it would.

She opened the door wide and smiled. She heard the gentle, rather ponderous breathing and the muffled but eager tread. She was impressed by the physical dimensions. She noticed that the eyes were twinkling like raindrops.

'I'm your Uncle Arthur,' said the elephant.

'Oh, Mother, Mother! The elephant that has come says that he is Uncle Arthur!'

There was no reply. Her mother must be thinking. How rude. Lily smiled at the visitor who was standing patiently upon the threshold, completely filling it. Then she popped her head round the sitting-room door and interrupted her mother's thoughts.

'He says he's Uncle Arthur,' she said.

'Who does?' said Mrs. Albion.

'Sh!' Lily made a polite gesture. 'The elephant.'

'What elephant, Lily?' Her mother looked cross.

'The elephant I told you about, who has just called.'

'Lily! Come right in.' Mother was wasting time, but she was very cross. 'Now tell me: who is at the door?'

'Uncle Arthur.'

Mrs. Albion winced. The child was imaginative, of course, that was the danger—a misfortune, in fact. *Uncle Arthur*. 'I'll go to the door myself,' she said.

They found the elephant wedged. Mrs. Albion screamed. Lily felt sorry for him, and frightened. He was stuck fast, more in than out.

'Help!' cried Mrs. Albion. 'A zoo's escaped. Help! We shall be trampled underfoot!'

'Oh, Mother! He's terribly stuck. What can we do for him?'

'Come away, Lily. Quick! Run round to the Bridies and telephone. Call the police—for its keeper. I'll come with you. What a horrid great ugly brute!' For a moment she hesitated, to convince herself that he was wedged. She snatched an umbrella from the hall stand. She was outraged—she would defend her home.

She had half-turned towards the back door when she heard the kindly voice of the elephant again: 'I'm your Uncle Arthur.'

Mrs. Albion stopped. It was all very well for Lily, who was an imaginative child, to see elephants and hear them talk, but she was proud of the fact that she herself was practical. She had never heard elephants talk. She disbelieved them. There was no doubt, however, that an elephant was wedged in her front door.

'I'm your Uncle Arthur,' he repeated.

A grey fear then enveloped her. When the Albions feared, it was grey and bleak in the house, like a November fog out-

side in the streets. The sitting-room sweated an emulsion of mistrust from its scrolled, crenellated and patterned contents. The hall stand wilted in abject submission: the stairs looked weak and rickety at the first fearful thought. Then Mrs. Albion, in a grey voice, addressed the elephant.

‘Will you repeat that, please?’ she said through clenched teeth. She was desperate. One thought had taken the place of all others. It was a legend in the family that Uncle Arthur—whose uncle he was had never been clear—had been sent to prison for a long term, convicted of an unmentionable crime. That thought alone induced Mrs. Albion to address the elephant.

‘He’s said it twice, Mother,’ cried Lily; ‘and he must be terribly uncomfortable. . . .’

‘Quiet, Lily! I wish him to repeat that remark.’

The elephant eased his position. He regretted his haste in accepting Lily’s invitation to come in. ‘I’m your Uncle Arthur,’ he repeated with some lack of enthusiasm. But Lily clapped her hands and danced round in front of him.

‘I’m Lily!’ she cried. ‘Little Lily!’ Her voice rang out bravely against the grey pallor of the lincrusta in the hall. The bead curtains danced with her.

‘But this is absurd. What will the neighbours think? Stop dancing, Lily! Go and play quietly out at the back.’ Mrs. Albion slammed the umbrella into the wickerwork stand. Her worst fears were realized, though she was satisfied now that she was in no danger of physical attack. ‘And, Lily! Not a word of this, mind. If the Bridie kids are nosey, you had better ignore them. Now, out you go, and let me think in peace.’

* * * *

‘Good-bye, Uncle Arthur!’ She ran out into the cold afternoon sunshine. How rude Mother had been. Uncle Arthur was standing there so meekly. Probably he was most uncom-

fortable, too. The least one could have done would have been to offer him a bun.

Lily was a kind, sweet-tempered child, in spite of Mrs. Albion's vigilance. It took more than a church-going mother and her rigid interpretations of truth to discover, much less disturb, the child's convictions. Lily had always believed that an amazing event would happen one wet afternoon. Hundreds of times she had imagined visitors such as Uncle Arthur appearing at the front door. Now it had happened, quite suddenly. A new truth had been added to life.

While Mother was trying to fit the visitor into the anxious interior of 'The Croft,' she would run out of the 'Tradesmen Only' and buy him a bun—or two, for there was twopence in her savings-box. She was not afraid of Uncle Arthur being sent away, because there had been undeniable anxiety in her mother's voice. It meant that the front door must be shut at once, before the Starks, from opposite, saw in. Besides, Uncle Arthur was wedged more in than out. It would be a job to get him out again.

So Lily skipped off through the 'Tradesmen Only,' and ran to the baker's shop, ignoring the Bridie children who called after her at the corner.

Mrs. Albion stood alone with the elephant in the frightened house. She was trying to calculate.

It was more difficult than calculating the hire-purchase terms of a mahogany radiogram (like the Bridies', only better): more difficult than finding the money for the motor-car insurance (the Starks had only a three-wheeler).

Mrs. Albion was trying to calculate the exact dimensions of the rumour she remembered hearing in family circles concerning Uncle Arthur and his unmentionable crime. It had not been mentioned for ten years. George had always declared, looking down his nose, that there were ugly things in many families which never need come to light if they were

never mentioned in any circumstances. One must never take a risk with a thing like that, he had said. It led to loss of prestige, goodwill, and—invariably—clientele.

And then, of course, there were the neighbours. Look at Mrs. Carver, when her sister was divorced. She was hardly able to go out of the house: and everyone sent her anonymous letters. Mrs. Albion turned over in her grey-curtained mind the words, 'I'm your Uncle Arthur.' There was something sinister, something irrevocably destructive, about them. From an elephant, too.

She was now satisfied that the patient beast that stood in front of her had said these words, and might say them again. She had heard, too, of elephants trumpeting, particularly when cornered. There was no time to be lost. The Bridies, the Starks, or (heaven forbid!) one of the snooty Miss Carvers, might at any moment pass, and, looking through the laurels see the elephant. Worse still, they might hear him repeat his declaration.

'Come in,' she said, 'if you must. I'll put you into the conservatory till George comes home from work.'

Wherever he had come from, Uncle Arthur could never have encountered a less gracious invitation. The front door was pressed right back on its hinges as he strained to squeeze his hindquarters through. Mrs. Albion, her hands clumsy with fear and disgust, fretted with the bead curtains, and opened invitingly wide the double doors leading to the conservatory.

It was fortunate that for privacy George had whitewashed the conservatory glass. At one time the neighbours had seemed to live upon the doorstep of the sitting-room which could be seen through the glass. George had determined that there were limits to neighbourliness: there was a point when you must keep yourself to yourself. That determination, Mrs.

Albion reflected, had risen at the time he had become junior churchwarden. Now the whitened panes were to succour them in a situation which might imperil the very foundations of life at 'The Croft.' It showed, in a way, how guidance, and a little common sense, sometimes followed services unstintingly given: services which, at the time of their being offered to George, were considered to be of questionable value, as the Carvers were the only people in the road who went to church, and they alone were witness to the dignity of his duties.

Mrs. Albion sighed. There were no plants in the conservatory; nothing but a few gardening tools and Lily's pram. She quickly moved these to one side. The elephant was still straining at the front door. Every moment jeopardized her position.

The latter end of that elephant writhing in her front door, were any of the neighbours or the tradesmen to catch sight of it, would give rise to endless rumour and speculation. Sooner or later Uncle Arthur's name would be mentioned.

No. Emergency action was necessary. Her own hat hung upon the kitchen door. In another moment she had withdrawn one of its pins and was out through the 'Tradesmen Only.' There she met Lily carrying her little bag of buns.

'Oh, Mother. what are you going to do?' cried Lily, waving her bag. 'Oh, Mother, I am excited!'

'Sh-sh! Remember what I told you about keeping to yourself. You'd better stay quietly in the kitchen till I call you.'

'But you're not going to hurt Uncle Arthur with that pin?'

'Be quiet and mind your own business.' Mrs. Albion's voice swept through the shrubberies like the grey wind.

'Shan't!' cried Lily defiantly. The shrubberies were lit with tinsel, like Christmas-trees. The 'Tradesmen Only' swung musically upon its hinges, twinkling with iridescent

red like a huge garnet brooch. Uncle Arthur was just round the corner!

‘What, Lily!’ Mrs. Albion, half-stifled by the heavy air of the frightened shrubberies, was suddenly at a loss for words. She turned quickly and ran to the front door, from which the straining bulk of the elephant’s haunches still protruded. All was lost if anyone should see her now, or overhear the cries of Lily. She staked her all on the efficacy of the hatpin, which she jabbed into a soft part of the great mammal which was inflicting such terror upon her home.

Immediately there was a roar, and the next moment the elephant was inside the house. With the voice of a church organ he emitted peal upon peal of sound.

‘I’m your Uncle Arthur—Ouh!’ he trumpeted. ‘I’m your Uncle Arthur—Ouh!’ Mrs. Albion slammed the door after him. He went through the hall into the conservatory. But he continued to cry out. The neighbours could hardly fail to hear those cries from the conservatory. The elephant sat down on the place where she had jabbed him.

‘Can’t you be quiet now?’ shouted Mrs. Albion.

The trumpetings continued.

What have we done, thought Mrs. Albion, that we should have been visited in this way? She thought of a dozen mean things she had done during the last few weeks. Not one of them seemed to justify the visitation of an elephant.

The trumpeting filled the house. The glass of the conservatory rattled. Lily came running in from the kitchen. Mrs. Albion made as if to slap her daughter for disobedience, for spending her pocket-money, and because she was afraid to slap the elephant. But Lily was too quick for her.

‘Poor Uncle Arthur,’ she cried, going into the conservatory. ‘But look what I’ve brought for you. Buns!’

The trumpeting ceased.

With a benign expression, Uncle Arthur reached out his trunk and took the buns. He was satisfied: he liked buns. 'Run round to the baker's and get half a dozen more, Lily. No, seven—for sixpence.' Mrs. Albion could not conceal her relief. Seven buns, though extravagant, was not an impossible price to pay for security, till George came home from work. 'And if you meet anybody, and they ask you what the noise was, say it was the wireless.'

'Don't go and hurt him again while I'm gone, Mother. It's going to be such fun having him.' The colours and shapes of a tropical jungle danced in profusion around her as she passed up the few yards of drive to the front gate. The late afternoon light which laved the tidy avenue in pungent ordinariness, swirled about her in magical effulgence.

Something had happened. The avenue, the drive, the front door, the wicker hat stand, and, most of all, the whitewashed conservatory, would never be the same again. An elephant had come.

'Lily, dear!' Mrs. Bridie leant over her gate. 'Are you all right at home? We thought we heard such a funny sound just now. I was just going to send to see. . . .'

'Mother says it's our wireless.' Nobody could tell an untruth and be aware of the glory of the afternoon.

'Oh a *new* wireless?' Mrs. Bridie felt that she had not been kept abreast with local affairs. Lily skipped on towards the baker's. Even her father passed unnoticed. Uncle Arthur will have had nine buns, she thought: how satisfied he will feel.

But all was not well at 'The Croft.'

George Albion, on his return from business, had not expected to find his wife conversing with an elephant.

'You had no business to come here,' she was saying. 'I don't care whether you starve or what happens. I'm not going to be made the talk, and, of course, the laughing-stock of the

whole avenue. . . .’ George stood still. It was not an elephant: it couldn’t be.

‘What *are* you talking about?’ he asked, ignoring the elephant altogether.

‘Can’t you see, George?’ snapped Mrs. Albion.

‘Yes,’ he said, relieved that she saw it too. ‘An elephant.’

‘I should think it *is* an elephant.’

‘But what made you get it?’ George Albion was losing his self-control. All things considered, his business reputation, his authority, his office in the church. . . .

‘It came. It walked in.’ Hysterically she turned again to address the elephant. ‘I don’t care whether you say you’re Uncle Arthur, or not. . . .’

‘I am your Uncle Arthur,’ said the elephant.

Mrs. Albion faced her husband as she would have faced death. There was no pride or arrogance or even cunning left in her demeanour. She looked sallow, ruffled with anxiety: and all the Albions’ fears emerged from their hiding-places behind the bead curtains.

‘Does anyone know?’ said Albion at last.

‘Only Lily.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Buying buns.’

Mr. Albion glared. Buns on Sundays, yes—but on weekdays it was just the kind of extravagance he was determined to put down. His small anger vented his huge quaking fear. ‘Why buns?’ he roared.

‘For the elephant.’

Mrs. Albion’s words laid him like ashes. Nobody spoke till Lily returned. Nobody answered when she asked if she should give Uncle Arthur the buns. They watched her feed sixpennyworth of buns to the elephant. Then George announced that he would speak to the elephant alone. The legend about Uncle Arthur’s crime had been unmentionable.

When they had gone, he lit the gas and questioned the elephant for an hour. He asked every question that a careful business man could ask an elephant. There was no reply at all. Then, looking closely at his visitor, he noticed that the small eyes were closed. The elephant was asleep.

That night, the Albions came to the most critical decision of their lives; they decided to keep Uncle Arthur concealed in the conservatory. It was the only safe course. With constant attention and vigilance they would be able to protect themselves from a danger which both agreed would destroy those virtues more precious than life itself, the respect of their neighbours, financial stability, and the support of the church. In the course of time the elephant might be induced to explain himself.

‘Shall I buy some more buns for Uncle Arthur?’ said Lily at breakfast.

‘Yes, dear. Run and get seven more.’

With the sixpence warm in her hand, Lily ran out into the bright new morning.

‘What, more buns?’ said the baker’s wife. ‘You are a hungry girl, Lily.’

‘We shall need plenty of buns just now,’ replied Lily, with joy in her voice which the baker’s wife failed to understand.

Plenty of buns were needed at ‘The Croft.’

During the next fortnight they tried every form of food, from dog-biscuits to rice-pudding. Uncle Arthur disliked them all. With anything but buns he grew restless, muttering to himself, and threatening to trumpet as he had done when Mrs. Albion jabbed him. He needed plenty of buns. It varied from three to four dozen. It was no good running and buying them by the bag. They were sent round by special delivery.

‘And the more buns they has,’ said the baker’s wife to Mrs.

Bridie, 'the thinner they gets. Like a pair of shadows, though Lily don't seem to suffer. . . .'

Mrs. Bridie nodded. 'I shouldn't wonder,' she said, 'if there's not something going on. Just what it is, I can't get at. . . .'

Everybody suspected something, but nobody suspected that the Albions were keeping an elephant.

Uncle Arthur said very little for three weeks, but he seemed to think his own thoughts, not snatchily as Lily had seen her mother think about possessions, but rhythmically like rain on wet afternoons. He was a pleasure to watch.

George Albion took to sitting by the conservatory door in the evenings, at first in order to carry on interrogation, but later because he, too, found pleasure in watching Uncle Arthur think. Sometimes he caught himself thinking himself: and one evening he read a book to Lily and the elephant.

Mrs. Albion did not join them until a week or so later, when the intensity of local gossip drove her out of the sitting-room. They gave up lighting the gas there because people were always calling on some pretext or other and mentioning casually the subject of buns.

Three to four dozen buns a day for three people.

Every other evening one of the Miss Carvers would call to see if her cat had strayed. Young Stark would pop in to borrow insulating tape. The Bridies—any pretext was enough for them.

Mrs. Albion became much kindlier when she met them all in the street, however: and everyone agreed that Lily was radiant. Lily had lost her spots: and that couldn't be buns.

Mrs. Albion found that sitting with Uncle Arthur calmed her. Sometimes she held Lily's hand and sometimes when they were all sitting round together she sang rather senti-

mental songs. The bead curtains clicked merrily and Uncle Arthur's eyes twinkled.

Except for the expense of buying buns, fears and anxieties vanished from the Albions' home. They had sold the car and sold the wireless set, and were wondering what to give Uncle Arthur for Christmas, when they realized that they had very little money left.

'Though we shall always be quite happy on what I earn,' beamed George Albion.

'I think it's time Uncle Arthur worked for his living, too,' said Lily. 'I'll tell him there's no more buns, and see what he does.'

'He's a lazy old thing, bless him,' sighed Mrs. Albion. 'It's a pity he costs us so much in buns; but then, I must say I don't grudge it.'

That night Lily told the elephant that there were no more buns when she went to kiss him good-night. They all laughed when she said it. They wondered if it would make him think of something new to say. But he thought ponderously that evening and went to sleep early.

In the morning he had gone.

'How he went through that door beats me!' muttered Albion.

'We shall have to tell the baker not to send the buns,' sighed Mrs. Albion.

Lily cried a little at first. But the world had not changed: it was still full of surprise. Something had happened. They bought her a small grey toy elephant for Christmas. But her father and mother laughed more often now, and they all agreed that it was not a good substitute for Uncle Arthur, so they burnt it.

In the avenue and round the corner, the inhabitants discussed the Albions' order for buns, whenever more than one

of them was gathered together. Its sudden cessation did nothing to diminish speculation. It gave the story a finality which added to its relish.

They discuss it still: and if the Albions overhear them, they just laugh.

The Lover of Nature

ONE OF Mrs. Salver's better qualities, I suppose, was her clear diction. You could hear each syllable she uttered with the precision with which a person with insomnia can hear noises in a silent house.

A less attractive quality was her claim that she belonged to Nature.

Dogs came to her, she claimed, and wild things never ran away—though it was common knowledge that the late Henry Salver threw himself off the roof of an insurance office. She claimed that shy green things grew for her alone. 'Little things,' she would add, 'seem to love the touch of my fingers.' She claimed that she had a way with gardens, animals, and insects: she called it Nature's way.

Had she been content to inhabit her house in the shrubberies and to enjoy the life of one of the better class suburbs, Nature would no doubt have been undisturbed. Clear diction such as hers, however, is self-assertive. Mrs. Salver's claims were public claims. Nature was invoked, cajoled, extolled and explained by her. There was no escaping Nature in the presence of Mrs. Salver. There was no escaping Mrs. Salver. 'If only she had a companion,' we said, 'or someone to take poor Henry Salver's place.'

'But look what happened to Salver,' said Mr. Wedge, who remembers everybody in the Bowls Club, however long ago they died. 'Salver had to take Nature's own way all right, didn't he, when he did his "oh, for the wings of a dove" off that roof.' Mr. Wedge smiled at the satisfactory reminiscence.

The basis of his devotion to the Bowls Club was the regularity with which members died off.

'All the same,' we said, 'it's a pity she never married again. It would at least have taken her mind off Nature and that sort of thing.'

'But it was wonderful good for the Club, the way she treated Salver,' said Mr. Wedge, 'it meant he lived for nothing but bowls in the end—though of course it went a bit far.'

She had been addressing the Women's Institute, I remember, for the third time during the summer, on bird life. She knew very little about birds, ornithologically speaking; but she had a place for them all in the realms of Nature. With un-Franciscan vehemence she had proclaimed that our only assurance of a prolonged after-life would be by our immediate communion with our friends the birds. That had led her to denounce Mrs. Wibley's hat.

The feathers in Mrs. Wibley's hat are an example of good taste respected throughout the district. It had not occurred to us that such a rich confusion of violet and orange feathers might be a crime against Nature. But Mrs. Salver had said that, and more. She had said: 'How can we expect to be at one with the dear birds when such headgear as that, flaunting *their* plumage is reared up in our midst?'

After church the following Sunday she announced, 'I shall concentrate on the Boy Scouts. In older people's minds the rot has already set in.'

'We all believe you to have a mission, Mrs. Salver, particularly those of us who knew Salver,' said Mr. Wedge.

Everybody sighed and looked away at this triumphant delicacy: but not Mrs. Salver, who remarked, 'I don't see what Salver's got to do with it. Human insensibility such as his could go no further. . . .' She caught the eye of a mangy sparrow scratching upon the lychgate. 'Tweet-tweet, little thing, tweet-tweet.' She trilled with triumphant clarity.

That was the first we heard of her bird-language: and

Mrs. Wibley's boy, Ernest, a keen scout, though many think, a vengeful character, was full of it.

Mrs. Salver in due course addressed the Scouts and said: 'We must all learn to converse with the little birds in their own language.' Then she twittered and chirped for nearly half an hour. She ended by saying, 'We are all a great family, the birds and us. We can all live together at peace if you and I make the effort.'

Up then spoke Mrs. Wibley's Ernest, never slow, as everybody knows. 'You have been good enough to show us what we ought to sing, Mrs. Salver. Now we should like to know what the dear little birds sing to us.'

Mrs. Salver's eyes looked out through her pince-nez like a disapproving fish behind aquarium glass. With bright clarity she answered, 'You should at least know that the little things are asleep now.'

'What about owls?' rapped that crusader, Ernest.

'Owls, our friends of the night watches, either screech or hoot, by this means calling to one another. As you lie awake, you will have their friendly company.'

Now one of Ernest's attainments was baiting owls in the tool shed at the bottom of the Wibley's garden, a performance which always won approval when he demonstrated it at the Scouts' annual camp.

'Mrs. Salver,' he asked with respectful modesty, 'I wonder if you would hoot for us now?'

So it happened that Mrs. Salver, in the innocence of her pride, stood at the door of the Scouts' hut and hooted over the bowling greens where Mr. Wedge was taking his ease in the shadows with bottled beer and a few friends with one foot in the grave. She was answered by an indifferent screech from the trees.

'Try again, Mrs. Salver. He may have a message,' whispered Ernest Wibley.

Mrs. Salver hooted till the watches and chains and good

pencil on her bosom were all a-jingle. The answering screeches began by being interested, then affectionate and finally rapturous. 'Perhaps he is saying what a warm night it is,' Ernest explained to the Scouts.

Mrs. Salver lost herself in this vocal exercise, her eyes turned upward to the trees in pious abandon. 'Two-hoo!' she hooted. 'Two-hoo-oo!'

There was a slow passionate crescendo. Ernest Wibley just had time to mutter, 'stand back boys,' when a swishing form, guided by passionate wide lamps of eyes, swooped out of the night and caught the hooting woman squarely in the face. When Mrs. Salver regained consciousness, the impassioned bird was standing upon the door of the Scouts' hut, gazing at her. 'He looks as if he's come to stay,' said Ernest.

'Keep that bird away from me,' she commanded, her voice like razor blades flaking the air.

Nevertheless the owl accompanied her home, heedless of the half-hearted 'shoo-ing' of Mr. Wedge and the more robust spoiling attempts of our Scouts. It flapped into the shrubberies and screeched knowingly all the time they were saying good-night to Mrs. Salver, who then admitted that perhaps she had overdone the hooting.

The story of her being knocked down while hooting was everywhere in the morning, of course, particularly among those of us who are near neighbours, for the owl continued to screech all night in the shrubberies, making sleep difficult. Mrs. Salver herself did not appear till the late afternoon: and then to our astonishment, she came out of her drive and down the Avenue at an uneasy trot. Flapping short-sightedly in circles round her person was the amorous owl.


Mr. Wedge then said he was sure it was love. But diverting as were these very brief appearances of Mrs. Salver in daytime, the nights within earshot of the shrubberies were unbearable. The screeching continued for three nights; and

then Mr. Wedge wrote a polite note, on behalf of all of us suggesting that there must be some law in the realms of Nature that would stop the row. Next night, Mrs. Salver seemed to come to terms with the owl. Within a week in fact, they became inseparable, which caused certain social difficulties, as you can imagine.

Opinions were sharply divided on whether one should bow to the owl, make appropriate sounds, or overlook him as one overlooked, for instance, Mrs. Wibley's lesser hats.

Ernest Wibley, whose reputation as an authority on owls had never looked back, suggested that Mr. Wedge should break the ice and say a few words to the owl one day while they were both out shopping. So Mr. Wedge said good morning, as usual, to Mrs. Salver in Tusk's the grocers, then turned to the owl who had settled on a tin of assorted sweet biscuits, and remarked, 'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?'

I shall never forget the wink, swift, cunning and enigmatic, of the owl's right eye. Mr. Wedge said afterwards how it reminded him of poor old Salver and how that made further conversation seem superfluous. Nor has any one of us, from that day to this, heard Mrs. Salver open her mouth on the subject of Nature, and our being at one with the little birds.



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